

Woman wants more people to just jump in

She hopes to change pool-poor Delaware County

Dean Narciso Columbus Dispatch | USA TODAY NETWORK

Six years ago, Laurie Karr learned that an East Coast college was unloading a collapsible bubble that could enclose a swimming pool. h The college swimmer, long-time coach and business owner had the inflatable 50-foot-tall housing shipped in two large trucks from Brown University in Rhode Island where a new swimming facility had replaced the temporary pool covered by the bubble. h “It kind of kicked off this campaign to get a pool. You need a pool to fit this thing over,” Karr said of the inflatable covering. “We had the land. We had the bubble. But we couldn’t get the funding together to make this happen.” h Even though Karr and her husband Rick – fiscal officer for Liberty Township near Powell – had proper zoning and approval from officials in nearby Berlin Township to build a pool, lack of financing put the project on hold.

But the quest to add another pool to the growing county didn’t end there. And now, funding for an indoor pool – with a real roof – is contingent on the Karr’s plans for a commercial development that would adjoin the pool.

The current plans call for a 60,000-square-foot facility at 1895 Peachblow Road, just west of railroad tracks near Peachblow and Piatt roads. About two-thirds of the space would house offices or commercial space, said Steve Flaherty, chairman of the Berlin Township Zoning Commission. The project is estimated to cost up to \$15 million.

Adding the space for professional offices will make the project more attractive to banks and in-



Laurie Karr, a lifelong swimmer and coach, hopes to build and open a new indoor swimming facility in growing Berlin Township. PHOTOS BY BARBARA J. PERENIC/COLUMBUS DISPATCH



Karr wants to build a new indoor pool in growing Berlin Township as a community resource and so more kids can learn about water safety.

vestors, said Karr. “It will also make us landlords.”

A zoning variance, from farm-residential to office-commercial, first will be needed. Plans are being reviewed and will come before the commission next month.

While residents nearby largely agreed to the bubble idea, the larger commercial plan is another matter, Flaherty said.

“The residents that are close by are definitely concerned,” he said. “It’s in the middle of people who have large acreage. Size and scope is definitely a concern.”

Preserving the township’s character and charm while encouraging responsible development is a challenge throughout the county, one of Ohio’s fastest growing, Flaherty said.

“We know that fields are going to change to rooftops. But every person when they move to an area wants to be the last one in ... to preserve their scenic views.”

“I think there’s absolutely a need,” Flaherty said of pools. “This is going to offer residents the advantage of lifesaving lessons and also a competitive route” for school-age swimmers and athletes inspired by recent Olympic stars like Katie Ledecky and Caeleb Dressel.

An indoor pool on the Karrs’ still-vacant 10-acre site is needed more than ever, said Karr, who swam competitively much of her life including on Ohio State University’s swim team in the 1980s.

Many pools, including those at Ohio Wesleyan and Otterbein universities, cut back or closed to outside swim clubs last year due to the coronavirus pandemic.

“It showed how much we need pools. People shut their pools and swim clubs were told they couldn’t come back,” she said of Columbus and surrounding communities. “We’ve become a very poolpoor city.”

“We’re talking thousands of people who didn’t have a place to swim.”

Karr, 53, is founder and head coach of Buckeye Swim Club, located in a nowvacant hotel at 888 East Dublin-Granville Road on the North Side.

She and volunteers have been removing old pool decking at the otherwise well-maintained pool facility that she leases and plans to operate from as long as she can, knowing that there is great demand throughout central Ohio.

Delaware County is blessed with resources. But year-round swimming facilities is not one of them.

The cities of Delaware and Powell each have YMCAs, and Mount Carmel Lewis Center has a full-size pool in its fitness facility. There also are a few municipal outdoor pools. But for a county approaching a quarter-million residents, demand far outstrips supply, Karr said.

The \$50,000 bubble, which cost another \$25,000 to ship, now sits in storage. The covering was not well-liked by Brown swimmers, one of whom called the facility “a toxic waste dump,” due to poor air circulation, size and lack of locker and changing facilities, according to a 2012 story in the Brown Daily Herald. Karr isn’t sure what will happen to it.

What she and her husband do know is that their development is perfect for the growing county.

Late last year, township trustees approved creation of Berlin Business Park, an area that offers beneficial zoning and amenities to attract thousands of new jobs along the Route 36 corridor west of Delaware. And the Evans Farm “new urbanism” housing develop continues to expand northward into Berlin Township from Lewis Center Road in Orange Township.

Now with four high schools, the Olentangy School District uses the YMCAs for practice.

Lauren Bailey, 37, an assistant coach for Karr, said her family moved out of the district to Upper Arlington, which has a high school pool, in 1998 because there were inadequate pools for she and her sister to train in.

“The reason my parents decided to leave the district was that there was no pool ... and there still isn’t.”

The area’s growth has put a strain on the county’s YMCAs said Roger Hanafin, executive director of the Delaware Community Center YMCA.

Hanafin calls pools “money pits,” especially for private owners who can’t leverage tax dollars, donations or economies of scale.

“The staff training, the chemicals, keeping thousands of gallons of water at pH level and heating in the winter,” he said are some of the costs.

A third YMCA on land owned by Evans Farm developers was scrapped after “not enough grass roots support,” Hanafin said.

For Karr, passion, confidence in her mission and a small army of supporters is enough to achieve her goals, she said.

“It’s been my dream to have a facility to house more kids, and that I can control,” she said. “The best thing you can do is teach young people water safety. You can’t do that without a pool.”

So far, she added, “It’s been a very hard journey to make that happen.”

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Founder and head coach of the Buckeye Swim Club Laurie Karr is working to rehab a pool that the club is currently leasing from a now-vacant hotel at 888 East Dublin-Granville Road on the North Side.
PHOTOS BY BARBARA J. PERENIC/ COLUMBUS DISPATCH



Karr hopes to build and open a new indoor facility in growing Berlin Township in Delaware County which is considered pool-poor.

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