

By Bill Husfelt

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***“It’s the things we play with and the people who help us play that make a great difference in our lives.”***

Fred Rogers

The iconic Mr. Rogers is so right about the importance of play when it comes to growth in our children and we’re pleased that our students can be involved in a variety of organized, and informal, opportunities to play throughout the day.

We know it’s important for children to have access to safe facilities for play AFTER school and on the weekends as well and we’re so glad to see our municipalities taking steps to make those opportunities more available in our community.

Many times I’m approached by coaches and community leaders who want to access our school facilities for some of those events and we certainly do all we can to make that possible. Unfortunately, however, we don’t have the staff or the funds to ready our playing fields for every team or to open every facility every weekend. Our facilities also need time for maintenance and for turf management to ensure they are in the best condition possible for our athletes. We know this can be frustrating to groups who want to use our facilities but, again, we don’t want to be the sole proprietors of recreational space ... we want (and need) municipal partners.

We are very excited to have great partnerships with our municipalities and we look forward to seeing an expansion of their facilities to help meet this community’s need for recreational facilities. The need was great before Hurricane Michael but the mental health challenges associated with the storm’s devastation have exacerbated the situation exponentially. It will cost money to correct this HOWEVER the long-term cost of NOT providing children with safe places to play and explore will be unimaginable.

I grew up in subsidized housing and the Oakland Terrance Little League Park and softball fields were an integral part of my childhood. To go swimming in a pool, my friends and I had to find someone to drive us out to a public pool on the beach ... we didn’t have any other options.

And, fast forward more years than I care to admit, we still don’t have many options for community pools. A community pool in town is one of the BIGGEST needs we’ve identified thus far. For about 40 years we’ve maintained the pool at A. Crawford Mosley High School but that pool is not approved for competition anymore. Our only BDS pool is very shallow and very expensive to maintain because of its age, so we’ve been brainstorming replacement options for quite some time. Replacing it on-site is probably more expensive than building something new, in a different part of town, that can be designed to better accommodate the community so that’s what we want to do.

Ideally, this venture would be in partnership with area municipalities since their residents would also benefit from having access to a community pool. We envision a state-of-the-art facility that can accommodate learn-to-swim lessons year-round as well as water-based activities for our children. A facility like this would give us the option to attract large swim meets and events from other areas and would give our middle and high school competitive swimmers a safe and accessible location for practices on the Panama City side of the bridge. We have State-Champion level swimmers and divers and we need to make sure we're giving them the support they need to achieve their dreams.

Don't get me wrong, we're incredibly grateful for the access our swimmers have at Frank Brown Park. Our partnership with the City of Panama City Beach is very valuable and we appreciate all of their accommodations for our swimmers and our events. It's getting harder and harder, however, to schedule events on the beach because the beach itself is growing by leaps and bounds.

A community/BDS pool partnership isn't the only item on our wish list. We definitely want to partner with local governmental agencies to ensure that all children have access to safe playgrounds and recreational facilities in our entire community. Right now the demand for our facilities and stadiums is simply more than we can manage so we know there's a need ... a need we can't meet by ourselves.

We would love to be a part of conversations going forward about the expansion of recreational spaces, and school/governmental partnerships, in every corner of Bay County. We value the concept of play and recreation, and we want to do all we can to ensure all children have equitable access to safe, supervised play spaces regardless of where they live. The county and municipal governments receive funding dedicated to these purposes but public schools get zero funding for community play spaces and recreational facilities. And that's why we need partners!

We will keep you posted as we work on the pool concept and partnerships we need to make that happen. We believe it's critical for children in our area to learn to swim and we want to do our part to bring that goal to reality but we will definitely need YOUR help!

Stay safe and God Bless!