

Senate Bill 121
Shawn B. Coates, College of Southern Maryland, Chair, Board of Trustees
Unfavorable Report
January 17, 2024

As chair of the Board of Trustees for the College of Southern Maryland, I am speaking in opposition to Senate Bill 121—College of Southern Maryland - Funding and Responsibilities - La Plata Pool. SB 121 is not in the best interest of the students or the taxpayers in Southern Maryland. This bill is an unfunded local mandate that diverts much-needed operational funding on an ongoing annual basis. Further, SB 121 prevents the Trustees from staying mission-focused, and that is to allocate resources that increase educational access for Southern Maryland residents; support current students in gaining momentum toward their educational goals; and support our students/alumni to find sustainable wages that bolster their social and economic mobility.

The Physical Education Building, which houses the La Plata pool, was closed along with all CSM campus buildings in March 2020 when we entered into the global pandemic. This pause was an opportune time for CSM to contract an engineering firm to conduct a complete assessment of this aging building built in 1974, and of its systems to develop a cost-effective, energy-efficient solution to position the building for the future.

As a result of this assessment, the significant pool safety concerns that were identified, and other critical factors, the CSM Trustees unanimously made the decision in late 2021 to permanently close the 50-year-old pool.

Among the factors considered were customer usage studies showing a troubling and declining trend in pool use over the past decade. We saw clearly that the lack of expected amenities, like a shallow pool area for young swimmers, a spectator area for parents, an entry ramp for swimmers with mobility issues, a warm-water therapy pool, and other features that are now considered standard in modern aquatics centers had resulted in CSM continuously experiencing declining use, and in turn, this led to ongoing operational deficits.

In light of these issues coupled with an overall declining enrollment for the college, the Trustees were faced with some tough, mission-focused, budget decisions. Chief among these was the pool decision in late 2021.

Since last Fall, 2022, the Charles County community has asked about the possibility of reopening the La Plata pool. And, CSM has been facilitating continued conversations for over a year with Charles County leaders, including the local Board of County Commissioners as well as the Charles County State Delegation, to identify a viable solution to address the community's interest in having an aquatic facility in Charles County.

CSM's leadership team provided our stakeholders with a feasibility study that offered three reopening proposals, including repairing the current pool as is, and two proposals for repairing and expansion. To reopen the current pool, the study identified several substantial repairs. Among these 19 areas of safety concerns are significant cracking in the pool shell plaster, expired drains, and replacement requirements for the circulation pump and chlorinator system.

The cost for renovations and to address these safety concerns is estimated at \$3 million and would take approximately two years to complete. Capital costs associated with expanding the current pool into a more modern facility to meet the needs of a growing multi-generational and diverse community range between \$9 million and \$21 million. In addition to renovation costs, the ongoing operating costs are estimated between \$350,000 to \$600,000 per year based on the type of facility and the community's usage.

After these detailed discussions, and as a result of their further study and deliberations, the Charles County Board of County Commissioners advised the Charles County Delegation on December 12, 2023 that the La Plata pool at CSM is not a viable short-term option as a recreational facility for Charles County citizens due to its age, condition, and restricted use. Further, the Commissioners presented their plans to invest and expedite a longer-term solution for a new, county-owned and operated multi-generational facility that will last at least 30 to 40 more years, and that will increase aquatic amenities and expand access.

This is a local issue, and SB 121 oversteps local authority to complete its feasibility study and use the design-build method to support a more efficient process towards procurement and completion.

I ask that the members of the Senate Committee for Budget and Taxations give SB 121 an unfavorable report.

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