

Waves of public emotion

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Nothing seems to bond a community like the threat to close a public pool. Why does the loss of pools evoke such outrage? CAMERON LUCADOU-WELLS and DANIELLE BUTCHER report.

WHAT Julie Clearwater doesn't know about Oakleigh pool isn't worth knowing.

For the past five years, the Oakleigh resident has spent dozens of "emotionally draining" hours fighting the closure of the outdoor pool.

Ms Clearwater, whose Community Life Action Group (CLAG) has been "the voice" of a vocal campaign to save the pool, said communities across Melbourne didn't want to lose their community pools.

She reeled off the names of similar protest groups in Seville, Croydon, Pakenham, Sunshine, Footscray and Fitzroy which had provided "moral support" to CLAG's cause.

Ms Clearwater said passions were high because the stakes were high for the community.

"It's because we're losing something, and it's not just losing something we have but losing something of the community. The pool issue has hit a raw nerve."

This nerve was exposed when Monash Council voted to permanently close the pool last June.

Before long, placard-

waving protesters crowded council meetings, and blue plastic ribbons and bags were hung from houses and shops in protest.

People who raised money in the 1950s to build the pool, as well as Olympic swimmer Linley Frame, former Oakleigh mayor Heather Norling, school students and sports groups voiced support for saving the pool.

A public rally last August attended by at least 450 people caused the council to capitulate — and it decided to reconsider a refurbished 50-metre pool and a diving pool as among possible options for the site.

The council's decision on the site's future is expected in May.

The same community action is being mirrored in Maroondah where the council is investigating the future of the Croydon pool.

Yesterday, the Save Croydon Olympic Outdoor Pool (SCOOP) group hosted its own rally to show support for the Croydon pool.

It was closed in January because Maroondah Council thought it would be irresponsible to continue running the

pool, with its excessive leaks, during water restrictions.

For the first time in the group's history, protesters were joined by some Maroondah councillors — five of whom have publicly expressed their support for the pool.

SCOOP founder Lorna Berger said she believed that without community support the council would have closed the pool years ago.

"Last week was exactly five years since we launched the first petition to save the pool. It has been a long five years, but now we have a commitment from the council.

"I have been determined to make the council see that this is what the community wants — so it should be the community who gets to make the decision about whether it stays open."

Monash Council pool steering committee chairman Stephen Dimopoulos said the council had learned one of the most basic of political lessons last year.

"You never close a pool or a library ... one thing that we learned last year is you definitely don't do that."



Taking action: Oakleigh Primary School pupils Nick, 11, Jade, 11, Nidhi, 11, and Spencer, 10, hang blue ribbons to 'save Oakleigh pool' last year.

Pictures: Lucy Di Paolo

But keeping Oakleigh pool afloat was a financial headache. Mayor Tom Morrissey said the council had invested heavily in swimming pools, such as the \$17.5 million Monash Aquatic and Recreation Centre in Glen Waverley and the pool under

construction in the Clayton Community Centre.

He said MARC's attendances were on the rise, to 780,000 annual visitations, and the centre generated a financial surplus. Oakleigh pool's attendances had fallen to 15,000 visits by the 2005-06 season.

Cr Morrissey said "hundreds of thousands" of dollars had been spent on Oakleigh pool's infrastructure in the past 10 years.

Ms Clearwater said campaigners were fighting against the view that Oakleigh pool should "pay its way", be open year round and be busy all year.

She said the Oakleigh community just wanted to keep its humble outdoor pool.

She said she wasn't surprised by the diversity of people fighting to retain the pool.

"What has surprised me is the older residents who've said, 'I won't use it, but we need this pool for our kids'."



Civic bonding: Protesters rally to the pool days after Monash Council announces its closure.

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