

The
Tip
of the
Mitt
Journal



Where is Petoskey's swimming pool?

The story of why Petoskey does not have a community pool

by **Richard A. Wiles**

First published in the December 2015 issue of the Mackinac Journal

Brought to you by



Newspapers, community photos, genealogical research at www.gwood.us

‘Where’s the pool?’

Petoskey’s 50-year-long search for a swimming pool

By Richard A. Wiles

There are, at the time of this writing, 115 community swimming pools in the state of Michigan. The Upper Peninsula has 10, and the Tip of the Mitt region (plus the eastern Upper Peninsula) has eight of them. They are located in Sault Ste. Marie, Rudyard, Alpena, East Jordan, Charlevoix, East Jordan, Gaylord, Kalkaska. There are two public pools in Traverse City.

The first community swimming pool in the Petoskey area was built by the Bay View Association in 1911. It was located along the Little Traverse Bay shoreline below the association’s tennis courts. The building, named Recreational Hall, contained a bowling alley and a heated swimming pool. It was in use until 1917, when it was permanently closed. Prior to that, beginning in 1914, the location was subject to flooding problems from the rising waters of Lake Michigan. The pool was lower than the lake, and the recreation department was constant-



Should it be an indoor or outdoor pool? — One of the many questions people of Petoskey volleyed back and forth during the 50-year-long debate.

ly pumping out lake water. With the coming of World War I and the men at the recreation department called to war, the pool closed. Eventually, it was filled in with cement.

Prior to the Bay View’s Recreational Hall, a public swimming pool in Petoskey existed at the leftover Lake Michigan shoreline quarry of Hiram Rose’s Michigan Lime Company. That quarry began to form in the year 1875, as Rose’s workers dug into the limestone cliffs to harvest the naturally made dolomite used in cement manufacturing. By the 1920s, the quarry got to be 45-feet deep, and filled with spring

water. It was a favorite local summer swimming spot until the tragic drowning of 15-year-old Marion Mayes, Jr. in June of 1960.

The lime kiln pond was placed off-limits for swimming by the Petoskey City Council, and, at the July 5, 1960, meeting of city council, the idea of a publicly financed city swimming pool was discussed. Petoskey councilman George Henika stated, “... there was a definite need for a year around swimming pool here because children here do not have the opportunity to learn to swim that others do in the metropolitan areas

3 - Where is the Petoskey pool?

where there are pools in the school systems.”

While the city had no swimming pool, it did have a bathing beach along the waters of Little Traverse Bay, Lake Michigan. Back in 1934, during the height of the Great Depression, the city of Petoskey was able to purchase from the Michigan Tanning & Extract Company, a portion of their land to make a sandy bathing beach just northwest of the city near Bay View and Kegomic.

For the sum of \$25,000, 2,700 feet of Lake Michigan shoreline became city-owned, along with the company's Lake Street office next to the county courthouse. The city used that building as a city hall until a new county building was built in 1966. At the same time, in early 1934, the state of Michigan deeded the Magnus State Park property to the city. The city now had two potential swimming areas, but no swimming pool. In the mid-1950s, the Petoskey Bathing Beach was in a state of disrepair and no longer a city-controlled bathing area. The public shelter that had been built in the 1930s had been vandalized and the beach filled with broken bottles and other rubbish.

In June of 1962, Michigan purchased 175 acres of the former Michigan Extract & Tanning Company property from its parent company, Howe's Leather Company. The property was



Bay View Association lakeshore swimming pool in 1911



Petoskey waterfront lime-kiln pond

situated between the city of Petoskey's bathing beach to the north, and the old tannery property to its south. The total price was \$125,000. Over the next few years, the property lay dormant while city and state officials talked about a purchase of the former Petoskey Bathing Beach property. The Department of Natural Resources wanted the property in order to make a state park. Local newspaper editorials in the mid-1960s supported the idea of the creation of a Petoskey State Park. The editorials, for the most part, also supported the sale of the Petoskey Bathing Beach property.

During a February 1964 school

district election, the voters rejected a swimming pool complex as part of a new high school building project. The additional \$175,000 for the pool was defeated by 65 votes out of 1,735 cast. The other \$2.35 million school building project passed — 1,254 yes to 461 no votes. The margin of defeat was close enough for a second vote on a school district swimming pool to take place on October 3, 1966. This time, the voters rejected a \$375,000 swimming pool proposal by 2 to 1 (1,014 no, 585 yes votes).

By late 1967, the talks between the state and the city were to a point that there was a proposal to hold a city-wide election to decide the fate of the city-owned Lake Michigan beach property. However, the call for a public swimming pool seemed to fade away over the next couple of years. In the spring of 1968, Petoskey city councilman James Gibson revisited the idea of Petoskey having a public swimming pool. Gibson suggested that the off-limits lime kiln pool along the waterfront be made safe for swimming. At that time, most public

4 - Where is the Petoskey pool?

swimming in the Petoskey area was taking place in Lake Michigan, at either the city's Magnus Park area, or further north along Little Traverse Bay at the city's bathing beach (later to become Petoskey State Park).

By 1968, the Lake Michigan alewife annual summer die-offs were making shoreline swimming almost impossible. This was the reason Councilman Gibson suggested a makeover of the lime kiln pool as a substitute swimming area. He suggested that perhaps the 45-foot-deep pool could be filled in to create a safer uniform depth. Another councilman, Dr. Thomas Turcott, added that, "... sand could be spread around the edge to provide a beach ... if the city would plant some shrubbery in the area and grass ... it could become quite a recreational area."

Meanwhile, that same spring of 1968, Petoskey was in open debate over a possible sale of the Petoskey Bathing Beach. That area of Little Traverse Bay had once been a part of one of Petoskey's oldest industrial plants, the Michigan Tanning and Extract Company. The leather production facility had begun operations in 1887 as the W.W. Rice Leather Company and, in 1911, was sold to the Michigan Tanning & Extract Company. In 1934, during the time of the Great Depression, the local Civilian Works Administrator (CWA) Katherine Foley sought and received State of Michigan approval for a community bathing beach project at the Lake Michigan site.



Petoskey's Magnus Park



Petoskey's Bathing Beach (now Petoskey State Park)

On Monday, March 30, 1968, the voters of Petoskey had before them a "yes or no" proposition to give the city council permission to sell the "... city's beach property for not less than \$150,000 to the state of Michigan for inclusion in the Petoskey State Park."

The vote did not mean that city council would sell the lakefront property, only that it would have the authority to do so if the council so

agreed. A "no" vote meant that council would not have the right to sell.

The figure of \$150,000 was used on the ballot and came from state and local officials negotiating a possible sale price in their recent talks. State park officials said it would be up to the state legislature to appropriate money for such an acquisition. There was some opposition to the ballot proposal from those who felt the city-owned property should be sold

5 - Where is the Petoskey pool?



Petoskey's Bathing Beach (Kegomic)



for a higher price to private interests who wanted to develop the site as a resort property.

Leading the opposition to the sale of the beach property to the state was long-time city resident and attorney E.G. "Dutch" Pailthorp. In a local letter to the editor, on March 28, 1968, Pailthorp wrote:

"... I was born in Petoskey in 1900 ... I served as city attorney ... workmen have been clearing the land ... of the 40 acres immediately adjoining the bathing beach and the 40 acres on Round Lake in preparation of a beautiful resort subdivision ... It does not take much imagination to picture what this development will do to the value of the Petoskey beach ... Why has the 'Tin Can Tourist' become such a sought-after tourist by so many of the citizens of Petoskey because that type of tourist is exactly what the state park will attract ... My father (Judge Charles J. Pailthorp) once said, 'They come with a celluloid collar and a paper dollar and don't change either.'

Petoskey has always been a resort town ... not a tourist town!"

The election results were overwhelming. Petoskey voters approved the proposal to allow the city council to negotiate a sale to the state by a five-to-one margin (1,226 to 243). On May 19, 1969, the Petoskey City Council voted to sell the beach property to Michigan for the appraised price of \$150,000. Back in 1965, the state had asked the city to donate the property to them for a state park. That did not happen. Thirteen months after voters approved the sale, it took place. The new state park would contain 300 acres which included 6,000 feet of Lake Michigan shoreline. Reg Sharkey became the first park manager for the Department of Natural Resources. The campground opened on July 12, 1969.

The \$150,000 proceeds from the sale were set aside by a city council vote in a "special fund" until a decision could be made on what the money would be used for. The money was not placed at that time in the city's general fund. City resident Dr. John Tanton told city council members at the May 19, 1969, meeting that he felt the money should be earmarked for some type of city recreation.

At the time of the city vote on whether

or not to sell the bathing beach property to the state of Michigan, city manager Richard Gorman had listed under his arguments in favor of selling, that the \$150,000 or more could be used in many ways such as, "... the Bear River development, a swimming pool, a city garage, a new fire truck, and many other ways ..." The money sat in the unmarked fund until 1973 when the issue once again arose of having a city public swimming pool. By that time, the fund had grown to \$185,867. It had been invested at 5.75% in two-year certificates of deposit.

At the October 19, 1971, Petoskey school board meeting, it was announced that a swimming pool commission named the City-School Commission for Petoskey Area Swimming Pool had been formed with Mrs. Fletcher Johnson, John Parker and Ed Sobleskey as a few of the members from the school district. On November 1, 1971, the city council passed a resolution that created a joint commission for a community swimming pool within the Public Schools of Petoskey district. The new commission would be made up of nine members with four of the members being appointed by the city council. All members would serve

6 - Where is the Petoskey pool?

without pay. The newly created commission was given five years to build a pool estimated to cost \$500,000.

This time, once again, it was proposed that the larger encompassing school district be the site of the proposed pool and its operator. Council had earlier designated \$100,000 of the \$150,000 paid to the city in 1969 by the state of Michigan. All other money donated for the new pool effort would be recorded and returned if the pool project failed to take place. Council appointed William Blanchard, Dr. Benjamin Blum, Dr. Jack Postle, and Ray Blanz to the pool commission.

In early 1972, Petoskey resident Blanchard addressed the city council as chairman of the Petoskey Area Swimming Pool Commission, the group that had organized in October of 1971, to facilitate the building of a community pool. Blanchard said that his group had plans drawn up by Daverman & Associates, an architectural firm in Grand Rapids. The plans showed an estimated cost of \$600,000 for a community pool the size that would be appropriate for the population of Petoskey. At that time, a resolution was passed by council in support of the pool with a pledge of \$100,000 and the stipulation that the pool be built on property at the Petoskey High School. Then operation and maintenance would be carried out by the school district.

Blanchard was able to get city council to agree to a cost-sharing on the project with \$100,000 of the total price coming from the beach property fund, another \$200,000 coming from private donation and \$300,000 coming

from a grant of the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, a federal agency administered in Michigan by the Department of Natural Resources. The only catch was that the swimming pool had to meet the bureau's requirement that it be an "outdoor pool." The bureau insisted that three sides of the swimming pool building be open. The only solution was to look into removable walls.

At that time, in the early 1970s, there was a pending bill in congress that would allow Bureau of Outdoor Recreation funds to be used for building indoor/outdoor pools adequate for colder climate areas like northern Michigan. At a January 23, 1973, Petoskey City Council meeting it was disclosed by city manager Gorman that the proposed pool was still under consideration and that the Public Schools of Petoskey had agreed to be in charge of the pool's maintenance. Gorman said the plans for a pool were only preliminary and that Daverman & Associates were working on them for no upfront charge. If the pool was built, they would add on the designer fees.

During the January 23, 1973, council meeting, city attorney Michael Stroup told those in attendance that the idea of the city being the owner of the proposed community pool served two purposes. One, any private donations would be tax-exempt, and two, in order that state and federal funds be used, the city had to be the owner. Gorman added that the \$500,000 cost above the city's \$100,000 recreation fund, was a lot of money to raise without federal or state help.

In June of 1974, the pool group came again to city council, however with a new twist. Blanchard said his group now wanted the proposed Petoskey Community Swimming Pool to be the responsibility of the City of Petoskey's Parks and Recreation Department. The group said it had collected \$11,000 in private donations that would be coupled with the \$100,000 pledge from council and more of the construction funds to come from the Michigan DNR. At this point, the total cost had shrunk to only \$200,000, and the pool was to only be an outdoor one. According to Blanchard, a lend-lease agreement was being worked out with the school district for the site of the proposed pool.

An agreement by the city to operate and maintain the community pool had to be worked out before an application could be made for funds from the Department of Natural Resources. If that was done, grant money could be obtained as early as July 1, 1974. Blanchard also explained that when grant money could not be obtained for a year-around indoor pool, school officials dropped their interest in operating and maintaining the facility. That was because an outdoor pool would not be available as a teaching facility during the school year. At the June 4, 1974, meeting, strong support for the outdoor pool came from city residents Gorman, Postle and Dr. Del Andrews.

On August 14, 1974, details of the community swimming pool were shared at a meeting of the Petoskey Kiwanis Club. Forest Evashevski, a Petoskey area resident, and Postle told the group:

7 - Where is the Petoskey pool?

“... the pool will have the standard lanes with a 25-meter competitive length. Its overall size would be 75 feet in length, 42 feet in width and cost \$200,000. The money would come from the \$100,000 city council pledge and \$100,000 from the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation via the Department of Natural Resources. It would be built behind the present high school ... use of the pool would be from May to September in a 20-week program at the end and the beginning of the school year and through the summer city recreation program ...”

The cost of the 20-week pool operation was estimated to be \$20,000 and that would come from user fees. The swimming pool group said they were confident that the city taxpayers would not have to finance any operational deficits. It would be covered by private donations. It was also suggested that Bear Creek Township and Emmet County recreational funds might be offered for use. However, none of this was what city councilman Anthony “Tony” Scally wanted to hear.

Scally led a campaign against the pool by organizing a petition drive to block the city council from using any tax payer funds to operate the pool. During the summer months of 1974, a letter-to-the-editor battle was waged in the local Petoskey newspaper for and against the community pool. Some of the other opponents to a community pool suggested the city’s \$100,000+ fund from the sale of the Petoskey Bathing Beach property be used to beautify the Bear River area. Others wanted a waterfront beautification project.



Tony Scally

The pool committee (the Petoskey Area Swimming Pool Commission) answered the negative letters in the local newspaper by stating the pool would not be operated with Petoskey city taxpayer’s funds. Open swimming would cost each person 50 cents, and swimming lessons for a 12-week period would cost \$12. There would be family rates, group swim rates, and one-night-a-week rental rates. The Petoskey Pool Commission publicly stated, “... we will keep our status to continually see that the city taxpayers will not be taxed to maintain and operate this much-needed swimming pool ...” Meanwhile, Scally’s effort to gain enough signatures for a city election on the subject of the swimming pool was successful. A vote was scheduled for the November 1974 election.

A final pre-election vote plea from the pool commission appeared in the Petoskey newspaper on Friday, November 1, 1974. In the special column, the letter writer, Max Putters, Emmet County’s planning official and Petoskey resident, said he believed,



Max Putters

“... there are many good reasons why a pool should be constructed ... reliable swimming instruction, reliable community control of swimming programming and scheduling ... an excellent outlet for the energies of our youth ... a place to go, and something to do, and a good source of physical activity for persons of any age group ... Grant monies are very scarce ... an outdoor pool is an opportunity that should not be ignored ... we should view a swimming pool as a community asset ...”

The voters of the city of Petoskey on November 5, 1974, cast 1,254 no votes, and 831 yes votes to ban the use of city tax dollars in the support of a community pool. Fourth Ward councilman and downtown clothing merchant Scally commented, “The people knew the city would get stuck with it, and they wanted to save tax dollars.” The vote blocked the city from spending any funds, using any personnel or equipment for any pool but did not block the use of grant money, or private donations for a community pool. The city could still support a swim program at the indoor pool of local ski resort Nub’s Nob as it had been doing for a number of years.

8 - Where is the Petoskey pool?



Outdoor pool at Nub's Nob

In February of 1975, the city council was told that, following the November 1974 vote to ban the use of any city funds in support of the operation or maintenance of a community pool, the city still had the right to hire swim instructors, but not any supervisory personnel for them. City attorney Michael Stroup gave council his interpretation of the approved proposal ban and included the fact that the city could also not lease a swimming pool for city resident use. In March of 1975, the city council passed an amendment to the city budget to include a city-sponsored swimming program. The ongoing swim program at Nub's Nob would continue using funds from the recreation department.

The idea of a community pool was revisited in the summer of 1978. Petoskey businessman Ernie Mainland was the chosen chairman of a group calling itself the Petoskey Pool Investigation Committee. Some of those in attendance to the first July 24, 1978, meeting were Ken Winter, Steve Shu-

man, Keith Lamkin, Warren Parker, Louise Herlocher and Jeanne Verburg. The committee discussed the still unused \$100,000 fund committed to the development of a community pool by the Petoskey City Council in 1971, and the fact that there was a city ordinance prohibiting the use of city tax money to be used in operating or maintaining a swimming pool. Various questions arose at this meeting:

- How did other communities build and finance a community swimming pool?
- What would the optimum size be for a community pool?
- Where would be the optimum site for a community pool?
- Should the pool be outdoors or one that was enclosed?
- Should a community pool be part of a larger community center?
- Should any tax dollars be involved in operating a community pool?

At that time, some locations suggested were North Central Michigan College, at the old diesel-generating plant on West Lake Street, at a public school building, at the Little Traverse Rac-

quet Club, the Petoskey-Bay View Country Club, the former Kroger Building and the Winter Sports Park.

During a February 5, 1979, city council meeting, Mainland presented a petition with 300 signatures asking for the repeal of the 1974 city ordinance against the use of city dollars in operating and maintaining a community pool. In the March 27, 1979, city election, voters repealed the ban on spending funds for the operation of a community pool. The vote was 441 to repeal, 330 to not repeal the ban.

On October 26, 1979, a detailed report was published by the Marketing Resource Group of Lansing concerning recreational facilities in Petoskey. It had been sponsored by the Petoskey Rotary Club. A survey of area residents living in Bear Creek, Melrose, Resort and Springvale townships, Bay View, Walloon Lake and the city limits had been conducted August 3-8, 1979. The interviewers visited 300 residences to ask general questions about the recreational facilities in the area. Specific questions were also asked concerning a need for a community swimming pool. Overall response for the need of a pool was 58% in favor, 38% against and 4% undecided. Of those responding, 64% felt a pool needed to be one with year-around use. Of those against a community pool, 75% said there were adequate lakes and water for swimming.

The reasons cited most for a Petoskey area community pool at this time were for water safety classes and for instructional swimming lessons. A third reason most given was for physical

9 - Where is the Petoskey pool?

therapy and exercise. The survey was made public in November of 1979.

No action was taken in the following years due to rising oil prices, and a faltering national economy. In general, a vast uncertainty hung over the nation. In the spring of 1986, a new pool committee had formed, calling itself the Petoskey Swimmers. City resident Joe Blachy was its spokesman and the group backed the plan of a city-operated community pool to be located at the Winter Sports Park. This time the group's design called for a heated outdoor pool with the dimensions of 75 feet in length and 45 feet in width. Blachy told city council at a May 4, 1986, meeting that \$180,000 had been raised toward the project. He said that the estimate for construction was \$175,000 for the pool, \$75,000 for an office and bathhouse and another \$30,000 to landscape the area and add a deck. Blachy said the group felt a cover for the pool could be added later.

During the meeting, it was revealed that the Petoskey Swimmers had approached the Petoskey School District and Northern Michigan Hospital with hopes of one of them backing the building of a community pool. Both, however, had declined. The Winter Sports Park was the group's third option. By the end of May that year, the Winter Sports Park had been ruled out as a feasible site and attention was turned to the city's Curtis Park area as a possible pool site. At a special meeting of the city council on May 27, 1986, attended by over 70 people interested in a community pool, it was determined in a straw vote that the most desirable spot for a community



Petoskey Winter Sports Park

pool would be at the Petoskey High School campus.

City council member Thomas Gietzen told the group that he had found information statewide, "that nine-out-of-ten public pools in Michigan do not break even. A larger governmental body than the 6,000 residents of the city would be needed to support a pool." Mayor Joe Kilborn noted that the city council had asked the school district over 10 times to locate a community pool on school property. Kilborn also stated, "... personally my feeling is that it should be at the high school ... Do it the way Harbor Springs is doing it, that's the way it should be done." (Kilborn was referring to the special school election to be held in June of 1986 proposing a \$1.25 million levy to add a swimming pool addition to the school.)

At a July 1986 school board meeting it was agreed that the voters of the school district should decide the fate of a school district-sponsored swimming pool. On Tuesday, December 9, 1986, a ballot proposal calling for \$17 million in school improvement projects was

voted upon. The proposal called for a new middle school, a new football stadium and a pool. A record number of school district voters turned out to defeat the ballot proposal — 2,389 no votes to 1,200 yes votes.

Over the next 20 years, the idea of a Petoskey pool would continue to arise as a much-needed recreational improvement to the city. Each time, a roadblock would be encountered to halt the effort. In 2007, a new group had formed, called the Petoskey Pool & Community Center Group. It was made up of various individuals interested in seeing a year-around pool that could be utilized for swimming lessons, competitive swimming and low-impact exercise for older individuals. Cost estimates at that time ranged from \$4.5 to \$5 million to build, plus the yearly costs of operation. By that time, there were already community pools in Harbor Springs and Charlevoix. The group suggested that a recreation authority be created with the power to levy a property tax in support of a pool. A survey of Petoskey city residents and Bear Creek, Resort, and Springvale township residents

10 - Where is the Petoskey pool?

was sent out to 1,500 randomly selected taxpayers. Close to 500 (33%) were filled out and returned. The results of the survey showed:

- 60% of the 500 responses supported the idea of building just a swimming pool complex using tax money from a construction-only millage levy
- 3% of the 500 responses also supported an operations millage levy for the annual support of the swimming pool
- 55% of the 500 responses had no preference for where to place a community swimming pool; however, the two most-mentioned sites were at the Petoskey Middle School and the North Central Michigan College campus.

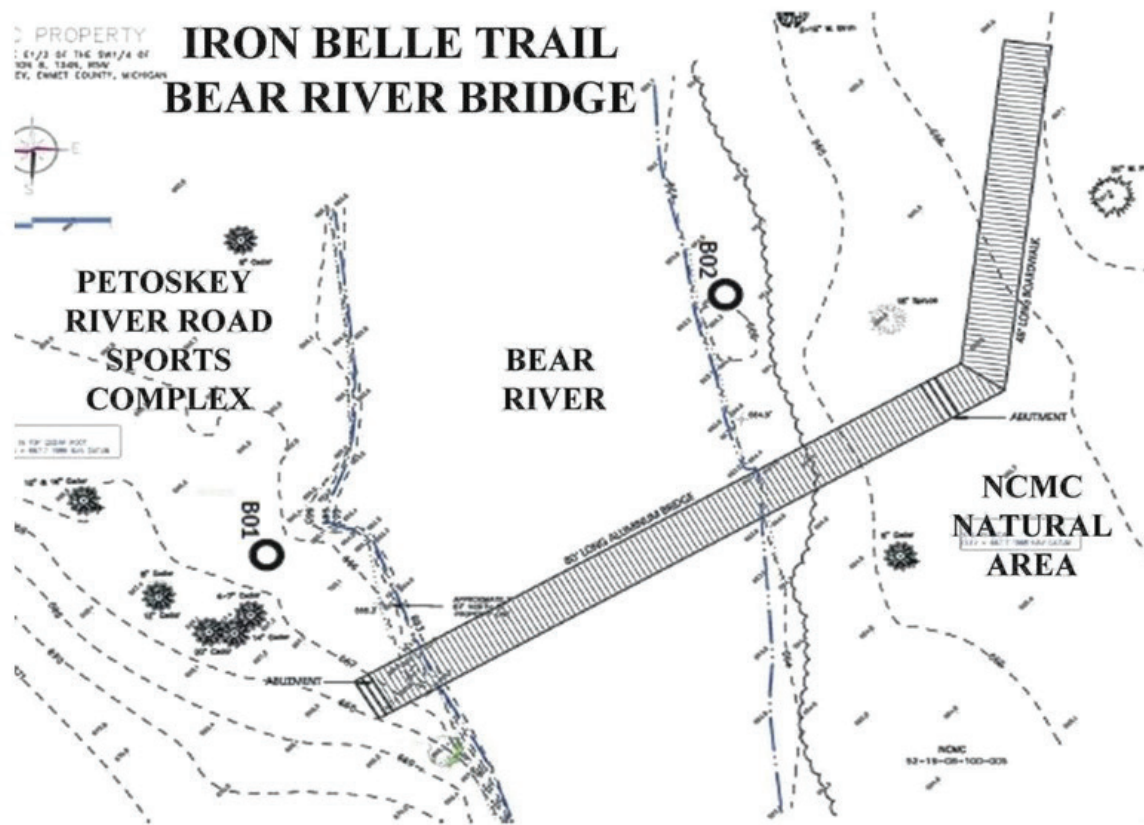
In fact, the 2001 North Central Michigan College Master Plan allowed for a swimming complex to be added to the existing Community & Student Resource Center building located on campus. Ten years later, in 2011, nine-year-old YMCA of Petoskey was publicly discussing the community's need for a full-service facility that would include a large gymnasium and a swimming pool. The YMCA in Petoskey had formed during the winter of 2001-02 with a group of people seeing a need for more family recreational choices during the long winters. A survey was conducted among the various community leaders (54) and over 90% of them had responded that an indoor community pool was a high recreational priority. Estimates of the cost of such a facility at that time had risen to \$6 million.

So, what happened to the \$150,000 fund? The fund made up of the money put aside in 1969 by the Petoskey City Council after they agreed to sell the Petoskey Bathing Beach property on Little Traverse Bay to the state of Michigan. Remember, by 1973, it had grown to \$185,000, and earning 5.75% per annum.

In 1965, the Bear River Development Commission had been organized under the leadership of Dr. John Tanton, a Petoskey ophthalmologist. At



11 - Where is the Petoskey pool?



2018 — Petoskey’s parks and recreation department, North Central Michigan College, the Michigan DNR and the North Country Trail Association collaborated to build a pedestrian bridge across the Bear River to connect the Petoskey River Road Sports Complex to the North Central Michigan College Natural Area.

a city council meeting, in late 1965, Tanton introduced the commission’s plan for the future of the Bear River in Petoskey. He stated, “The Bear River area presents Petoskey with an unusual opportunity ... It is rare, even for this part of Michigan, for a community to have undeveloped potential park lands within its city limits, already in public ownership ... It is even more rare to have a natural water course traverse these lands ...”

The Tanton Commission proposals were soon backed by local newspaper editorials and the quest to clean up, restore, and beautify the Bear River area. It became a long-term community project. For the next 40

years, countless grants, donations and local tax funds were used to create the Bear River Valley Recreation Area. Over the years following the 1974 defeat of the community swimming pool, the money in the fund was used at various times to pay for studies, match grants, and fund improvements to the Winter Sports Park, the waterfront and the creation of the Bear River Valley Recreation Area. 🌿

Richard A. Wiles is a retired history and reading instructor at Petoskey High School and a former Spring Arbor University class instructor in research. He has written five White Paper research projects for the Petoskey Public Library involving historical events in the

area, including the crash of the B-52 Air Force bombing trainer into Little Traverse Bay in 1971.

Wiles holds a Bachelor’s degree in history from the University of Toledo, a Master’s degree in reading development-psychology from Michigan State University and an Educational Specialist degree in community leadership from Central Michigan University.

SOURCES:

Bay View: An American Idea, Mary Jane Doerr, Priscilla Press, Michigan, 2010
The Petoskey New Review
The Petoskey Evening News
KEGOMIC: The Forgotten Village, David Barton, 1999
“History of the Petoskey State Park,” Reginald Sharkey, 1972