



MOTION on NOTICE

Submitted at the Regular Park Board Meeting on May 25, 2026

Think Free Swim: Carrying on Joe Fortes' Legacy through Universal Access to Basic Swimming Lessons and Expansion of Aquatic Infrastructure as Core Public Safety Policy

SUBMITTED BY: Commissioner Virdi

WHEREAS

1. The City of Vancouver is one of Canada's coastal and port cities, with a long-standing economic, cultural, and recreational relationship to the Pacific Ocean and its working waterfront, resulting in widespread and ongoing public exposure to aquatic environments;
2. Drowning remains a leading cause of preventable death among children and youth, and basic swimming ability is a foundational life skill essential to survival, safety, and confidence in aquatic environments;
3. The Lifesaving Society and other public safety authorities emphasize that early-stage swimming instruction, such as floating, treading water, and basic propulsion, provides the greatest reduction in drowning risk;
4. Swimming is not only a safety skill but also an important family and community activity, supporting physical health, social connection, and lifelong recreation across all ages;
5. The legacy of Joe Fortes, widely regarded as Vancouver's first official lifeguard and swimming instructor, reflects a long-standing civic commitment to ensuring residents can safely access and enjoy the city's waters;
6. Access to swimming lessons in Vancouver is constrained by both user fees and limited pool capacity, with affordability pressures disproportionately affecting families with children and newcomers;
7. The Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation currently delivers approximately 1,133 swimming lesson programs annually across introductory levels one through three, serving approximately 6,498 participants, with associated fee revenues of approximately \$420,590 per year;
8. Past and existing efforts to expand access to swimming instruction have demonstrated that partnerships between the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation and the Vancouver School Board can provide an effective and equitable model for broad-based delivery of introductory swimming education;
9. Municipal governments routinely invest in universal public safety infrastructure, including fire protection, transportation safety, and parks, without direct user fees, recognizing the shared societal benefit of prevention;



10. The City of Vancouver has historically adopted per-capita service benchmarks, such as parkland targets, to guide long-term infrastructure planning, and a similar approach to aquatic facilities would support equitable access across neighbourhoods;
11. The Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation has directed staff to initiate an update to the VanSplash Aquatics Strategy, with work anticipated to conclude in early 2027, creating an opportunity to incorporate consideration of aquatic facility expansion, service level targets, and access objectives arising from this motion into that planning process prior to subsequent consideration by Council;
12. Other Canadian cities, including Toronto, Calgary, and Edmonton, have expanded free or low-cost access to recreation programming, recognizing its role in public health, safety, and affordability; and
13. Addressing both financial barriers and infrastructure capacity constraints is necessary to ensure universal access to swimming instruction.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED

- A. THAT the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation affirm that basic swimming ability is an essential life skill and that access to introductory swimming instruction should be treated as core public safety goal.
- B. THAT Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation direct staff to work with the City of Vancouver staff to design and implement a program providing free access to the first three levels of swimming lessons (or equivalent beginner stages) for all residents of Vancouver, with priority access for children aged 3 to 12;
- C. THAT the Board direct staff to support Council's proposed per-capita aquatic infrastructure target (e.g., pools per 10,000 residents or equivalent service metric) to be achieved by 2035, analogous to the City's parkland provision metrics, including:
 - i. Current service levels and geographic distribution;
 - ii. Projected population growth and demand;
 - iii. Recommended targets to ensure equitable access across neighbourhoods;
- D. THAT direct staff to immediately restore the pre-COVID-19 operational procedures for all public pools in the City of Vancouver, including but not limited to the reintroduction of full-capacity operations without time-limited swim sessions, the reinstatement of drop-in public access alongside lane swimming and leisure use, and the resumption of in-person queuing and admissions practices that enabled flexible, spontaneous access for residents and visitors throughout the day; and

FURTHER THAT the Board directs staff to report back on the timeline and operational requirements necessary to reinstate this pre-pandemic service model in advance of the upcoming summer season.