

With 39 of the Toronto public school board's swimming pools set to close in June, time for saving these valuable community assets is quickly slipping away. But that doesn't mean there is no hope. Indeed – if all sides pull together – Torontonians, young and old, could be enjoying these now-threatened facilities for years to come.

In order for that to happen, several steps have to be taken, and soon. The most immediate need is for Queen's Park to step forward and cover the \$12 million capital cost of bringing viable pools back to a state of good repair. A report by former mayor David Crombie, who was asked by the school board to recommend ways of saving the pools, concluded that seven were beyond cost-effective fixing and should close. But the rest could be repaired with a timely injection of funding from the province's infrastructure budget.

"If we don't get that \$12 million from the province, then there's no game at all," says Crombie. Indications are that there will be at least some money flowing from Queen's Park for these facilities, but the full amount is needed. Given that the province is already committed to spending \$32.5 billion on infrastructure over the next two years, \$12 million – less than four-hundredths of 1 per cent–shouldn't be hard to find.

Even after capital funding is obtained, however, the challenge of covering the pools' yearly operating shortfalls will remain. That challenge should be jointly addressed by the city, the Toronto public school board and the community. According to Crombie, the public is doing its part by expanding swim club membership and generally providing more money for pool operations. These efforts have been so successful for 13 of the threatened pools that the revenue these facilities generate is now near the cost of mothballing the pools. That means there would little saved by closing them.

The school board could help by re-evaluating the basis of its decision to close the pools, as the amount to be saved is not as great as had been believed. Board chair John Campbell said school officials were surprised to find they would lose \$3 million in provincial facilities funding paid according to the square footage of the schools. That means that closing the pools would save just \$4.5 million, not an expected \$7.5 million, in annual costs.

Finally, the City of Toronto has a responsibility to help keep threatened school pools open because they are a valuable community resource. Mayor David Miller notes that the city is already paying \$5.7 million for municipal swim programs at 33 other pools run by the board, which are not marked for closing. "We've done our part," says the mayor. "This is a provincial responsibility." This is buck-passing at its worst.

Toronto should do what it can to save all the pools that remain viable. They are public facilities paid for by local taxpayers, back in the days when school boards had taxing power. Whether those taxes were channelled through a board of education or the municipality doesn't much matter. It would be foolish to scrap these assets due to an impasse on sharing the relatively minor cost of keeping the pools open.