



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
MAYOR KATJANA BALLANTYNE

Date: September 15, 2025
To: School Building Facilities and Maintenance Committee
From: Nikki Spencer, Chief of Staff
RE: Items 25-0727, 25-0729, 25-1132

Dear Members of the School Building Facilities and Maintenance Committee,

The following information from the Parks and Recreation (P&R) Department and Department of Public Works (DPW) is being provided to the members of the School Building Facilities and Maintenance Committee in response to the above referenced items. As Chief of Staff, I am working closely with both departments to ensure smooth pool operations in the absence of a Parks and Recreation Director.

Item #25-0727: That the Administration report to this Council on the cause of the reported chemical imbalance at the Ginny Smithers Pool and the process being used to address the imbalance.

To date, our DPW and P&R teams have consulted with both outside experts and our long-standing pool maintenance vendors. Our internal and external experts cannot identify a single clear cause for the disruption in service earlier this year. Instead, we have focused on improvements in ongoing maintenance, interdepartmental communication, and procedures for both of our pool facilities. Some brief examples:

- P&R has worked with DPW to purchase additional pool vacuums to assist in more easily and regularly cleaning each pool facility, resulting in improved cleanliness.
- P&R staff have worked directly with the City's Communications and Community Engagement team to improve public notifications through emails, public channels, and MyRec.
- The Aquatics team has updated Lifeguard and Pool Protocols, please see attached – reviewed in partnership with Inspectional Services Department and DPW.

Additional Intervention Options

In the spring, DPW and P&R solicited suggestions from multiple subject matter experts on other possible interventions. Both departments have worked to review the benefits and drawbacks of each. We offer the following conclusions:





Sphagnum Moss: DPW conducted further research to evaluate this relatively new product. Sphagnum Moss is a 'conditioner' and does not add residual sanitizer (such as chlorine) to the pool to control algae, bacteria or viruses. Sphagnum Moss treatments are monthly, and can only be conducted while chlorine and acid dispensing systems are at normal operations. If the pool is shocked or treated, the moss is ruined and requires replacement. The process is labor intensive and not guaranteed to address the needs of the pool. Currently, it's unclear if the moss would also physically fit into the filter at the pool.

Estimated cost: \$15,601 for both pools per use.

Ultraviolet Filtration System: UV systems have a high cost for installation and may require other upgrades to piping and electrical systems. In addition, they require on-going maintenance and replacement of the UV lighting.

Estimated initial cost: \$150,000

Charcoal/Carbon Filtration System: Charcoal and carbon filters do not reduce solids such as sand, dirt, rust, calcium, and other contaminants such as heavy metals. In addition, these are expensive systems that require ongoing maintenance.

Estimated initial cost: \$100,000

Conclusion – Adjust pool hours for routine adjustments:

Upon reviewing the above options, DPW, P&R, and the City's long standing maintenance vendor proposed a different first step. During the academic year, the Ginny Smithers Pool typically operates 7 days a week. We propose closing the pool one day during the week for ongoing maintenance and routine adjustments of the pool's chemical levels – the team is finalizing which day and will announce shortly. The goal is to ensure smooth, uninterrupted programming throughout the year. To make up the difference, Parks and Recreation is working to expand hours on Saturday and/or Sunday, both of which are high volume days at the pool.

City staff and leadership have continued to reach out to several experts and contacts in our region to evaluate other options. It is an unfortunate reality that as many of our regional pool facilities age, they require constant and ongoing maintenance. Again, by adjusting the schedule, it will allow P&R and DPW staff to routinely adjust the pool as needed. If this does not result in improvements, the City will return to considering more costly interventions.





Item #25-0729: That the Administration develop a new process to address ongoing maintenance at the Ginny Smithers Pool and report to this Council to describe that process.

Over the past several months, DPW and P&R have worked closely to address ongoing maintenance at both the Ginny Smithers and Dilboy pools to clarify roles across both departments. The following chart is a non-exhaustive list of responsibilities and duties. For larger issues, the P&R Director of Operations and Aquatics staff meet directly with the DPW Buildings team to investigate causes and determine next steps.

P&R	DPW
• Regular testing of chemical balance (4x/day) in compliance with all relevant codes, properly logged • Routine cleaning throughout the day • Basic adjustments to chemical levels as needed • Alert DPW to issues through 311, including direct phone call in urgent situations • Administer and deliver pool programming • Communicate with pool users and SPS stakeholders	• Address larger or ongoing facility issues • Contract with pool vendor to address mechanical issues • Custodial services (Kennedy School and Ginny Smithers Facility) • Partner with P&R on annual closure of pools for preventative maintenance

As an example of this collaboration, during the busy summer months, an issue with the smaller pool at the Ginny Smithers facility prompted swift action and teamwork across DPW and P&R. When the small pool's combined chlorine levels began to test outside of acceptable parameters, the P&R Director of Operations alerted DPW and appropriately closed the pool. Parks and Rec staff worked with Communications to post alerts through email, MyRec, and City channels. P&R staff then followed protocol to shock the pool's chlorine levels to attempt to bring it back into compliance. When this did not have an effect, P&R and DPW staff worked with the City's pool maintenance vendor to identify any potential causes.





One issue may have been a faulty piece of equipment. The pool's autofiller was not correctly gauging the pool's water levels, resulting in infrequent filling. As the Committee may be aware, the municipal water source that fills the pool is naturally higher in chlorine and this has been an ongoing dynamic with the Ginny Smithers pool in particular. One hypothesis is that when the pool had to be filled all at once, the municipal water's high chlorine levels may have caused the pool's combined chlorine to spike. The City's vendor repaired the autofiller and DPW worked with P&R to both shock the pool and treat it with a chlorine reducer known as sodium thiosulfate. As a result, the closure of the small pool was limited to a little over a week, and the large pool remained open throughout.

The Ginny Smithers pool facility has always required many fine-tune adjustments and careful work to continue smooth operations. DPW and P&R are committed to continuing to improve processes and communication going forward.

Item # 25-1132: That the Director of Parks and Recreation report to this Council on the cause of the chemical spill at the Ginny Smithers Pool and the process to address the cause of the spill and prevent a future occurrence.

On June 5, 2025, a chemical spill at the Ginny Smithers Pool prompted the closing of both the pool facilities and the Kennedy School out of an abundance of caution. Following the incident, both Human Resources and the City's Office of Emergency Management conducted separate reviews. The cause of the spill was found to be human error, specifically overfilling of a tank of muriatic acid, causing it to spill on the floor of the storage room. There was also water on the floor and a single container of chlorine was improperly present. Staff observed a bubbling reaction. The Somerville Fire Department, along with Inspectional Services and additional support from Cambridge Fire Department's Hazmat team arrived, ordered the evacuation of the building, and tested air quality before allowing entrance back into the school. No dangerous fumes were detected.

Based on preliminary recommendations from Inspectional Services, DPW and P&R have worked to clarify the limits of the tank and ensure proper storage and location of any and all chemicals in the storage area. DPW has also installed a shut off valve on the water hose located in the storage closet to limit any leaking and P&R has a wet vacuum to suction any remaining water on the floor. The Director of Emergency Management will be convening a session with both City and SPS staff across multiple departments to review the response on the day of the incident as an opportunity for training and improvement.





Please let the IGA team know if there are any further questions on any of the above information.

Thank you,

Nikki Spencer
Chief of Staff



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