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City On Pool Sidelines - Councillors Pass Buck Despite Protest

By Bryn Weese

Parents and students organized a rally outside the main doors of City Hall to protest the potential closing of 39 Toronto school pools.

Play Video Pleas from goggle- and swimsuit-clad protesters to save 39 school pools slated to close this year went mostly unheard yesterday.

Instead, following seven hours of public presentations and even a "Save Our Pools" rally in Nathan Phillips Square yesterday, the city's recreation committee asked staff only to keep participating as an observer in ongoing discussions and investigate whether the city even has a role.

"That is the direction we have given to staff," said the committee's chairman, Councillor Janet Davis, adding the city is already doing its part by paying \$6 million to run 33 of the TDSB's other pools the city rents for municipal swimming programs.

But although the committee was in no position to save the school pools yesterday, Councillor Karen Stintz, whose ward has three pools on the chopping block, said council could have at least made a political commitment to help keep them open.

A motion to do just that, which Stintz said would have given confidence to the province and potential corporate donors, was defeated.

"The opportunity that we had (yesterday) was to demonstrate that, politically, we're committed to finding a solution," she said. "We didn't seize that opportunity."

According to Heidi Wilson of the school pool advocacy group Let's Make Waves, the committee showed a lack of political leadership yesterday.

"It's the political will that is missing," she said. "We weren't asking for any money, we were asking for people to participate, and they lack the political will."

The pool-closing issue most recently came to a head a year ago when the TDSB slated 39 pools for closure, determining the money would be better spent on other programs.

"I don't have all the answers but I do know if we don't get operational money from the province and we don't get participation from the city, the rest doesn't matter," said former mayor David Crombie, whose Aquatics Working Group recommended keeping 32 of the 39 pools open with \$12 million from the province and operating funds from the TDSB, the city and pool users.

Claims the city is doing more than enough already and that school pools are the province's problem are "old lines that have kept us back from any kind of solution," he said.