

Residents respond to opposition, show support for CA's women-only swim times

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Inspired by the nature of online comments opposing the program, more than 50 people who support Columbia Association's women-only swim times came to the CA board meeting Tuesday, Nov. 22, in a show of solidarity.

The program started in October and will conclude its trial run at the end of January. It is being held at the Columbia Swim Center in Wilde Lake between 12:30 and 2 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays — a time when the facility has few people and when the pool being used is normally closed.

The program was prompted by a request from People Acting Together in Howard (PATH), an interfaith county organization that contacted CA about what it said was a need for women-only swim times.

Opponents weighed in with letters to newspapers, online comments and emails. Some of the negative response was directed toward CA, according to association spokeswoman Jessie Newburn.

"I was really impacted by how uncomfortable and how unattractive the comments were," Newburn said Tuesday, Nov. 22. "The emails I have received were mostly irrational and glomming onto inaccurate facts and perceptions. For example, more than one person complained about our Muslim-only program — when the pilot program is for women only and is not faith specific."

Newburn said she expected "a slew" of people to speak out against the program at the board meeting.

But no one did. Four supporters spoke out in favor of the program.

Shehlla Khan, of Wilde Lake, said that while some who wanted and are using the women-only swim time are Muslim, many are not. A majority of the supporters at the meeting were not Muslim.

"This is not specifically a Muslim issue. This is an issue for many women in our community," said Khan, who is affiliated with PATH.

She said the organization surveyed people in the community and learned that dozens were interested in a swim time for women. She also noted the number of women who use the female-only sections at Supreme Sports Club and other gyms.

"This new swimming time has made me and a few other families decide to become members of the Columbia Association," she said.

Katlin Lamke, an 18-year-old who said she learned how to swim at a CA pool in Kings Contrivance, said she stopped swimming about four years ago because of the unwanted attention she received from teenage boys.

"I can once again enjoy going to the pool, relaxing, getting exercise and having fun in a stress-free, female-only environment," she said.

Assmaa El-Haggan, of Wilde Lake, said Columbia has made big strides since the early 1990s when she would go to the pool and be told that her bathing suit — akin to a long shirt and long pants that conforms to Muslim values for when a pool is shared with men — was not safe.

"Now lifeguards don't give us any issues going in the pool wearing the clothes that we wear," she said.

But she noted that she does not need to wear the cumbersome outfit during women-only swim times.

"If I [can] just swim ... and not have to worry about all these layers and constraints, that would be great," she said.

At least five members of the clergy were at Tuesday's meeting, including Rev. Craig Sparks of the Columbia United Christian Church in Oakland Mills.

"I'm thankful that I live in a community that is bighearted enough to reach out to a group of people who may not get too much in the way of consideration," he said. "I'm thankful I live in a community whose first reaction is to try and include people, to make room for them, rather than ignore them."

A CA news release disagreed with the contention that the women-only swim time is a form of segregation or comes at the expense of men. It noted the success of the women-only sections at two CA gyms, and said that the Columbia Swim Center will still have its main pool open for all swimmers while the women are in the program pool. The program costs less than \$100 a week to have an additional female lifeguard.

"This program just seemed to be a no-brainer, just seemed to be a little thing," Michael Cornell, of River Hill, the CA board chairman, said Tuesday. "A lot of times it is the little things that make a big difference in people's lives."