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Hayward community rallies to fix swimming pool

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Section: Breaking

Eric Kurhi Hayward Daily Review

HAYWARD -- Just on the other side of a sound wall, 40 feet from where thousands of motorists edge off the Nimitz Freeway at Jackson Street every day, lies what some say is one of the best-kept secrets in the city.

It's the Southgate Swim Club, an institution in the neighborhood close to Southland Mall that has provided families with safe, wet, summertime entertainment for nearly 50 years.

"I had some of the best times of my life here," said Bob Houghtelling, a club member and the facility's caretaker. "I'm closer to some of the people I've met here than some of my own family."

But pools don't last forever, and a crack opened up last year that was costing the club \$4,000 a month in water just to keep it filled. Estimates to replaster the pool came in around \$80,000 -- far more than the little club of 80 families could afford.

"We had to make a decision -- try to keep it filled and run it into the ground, or take a chance," said club member Tracy Diaz, who is leading a fundraising effort to keep the pool alive.

Through a collaborative effort that involves plenty of elbow grease from club members, as well as a sympathetic contractor and an anonymous benefactor, the pool is well under way toward restoration. And not just patchwork fixes like those that have been done in the past -- all the plaster has been knocked off the concrete basin and carried away, bucket by bucket, and trenching has been done to replace electrical and plumbing lines.

"If this was a millionaire's pool, I would have told him it would cost \$200,000 to do the work," said Sergio Valencia of Agua Bella Pool Service.

Valencia offered to fix the pool at cost, and fronted the money for his men to do it. Because club members and other volunteers stepped up to do much of the grunt work,

the price tag will be about \$80,000. On Tuesday, volunteers dragged trimmed tree branches away from the site, Diaz's husband jackhammered into the cracked portion of the concrete and a Chabot College student shoveled dirt from a trench.

"This is the stuff you see only in movies," Diaz said. "The community really came together to do something everyone said was impossible."

So far they've collected more than a quarter of the needed money, with an anonymous donor matching \$10,000 in private donations.

While they have a long way to go, Diaz and Houghtelling were both optimistic that their efforts will pay off in an improved pool and club.

"It's going to happen," Houghtelling said. "People are going to be jealous of us very soon."

Contact Eric Kurhi at 510-293-2473.

HOW TO HELP

Donations can be mailed to the Southgate Swim Club, P.O. Box 138, Mt. Eden, CA 94557.