

RON WURZER / SEATTLE TIMES

Special features of the new Bellevue Aquatics pool include steps and a ramp for disabled people. The pool's 92-degree water will be a therapeutic haven for those in wheelchairs and those with arthritis, birth defects, sports injuries and a range of other needs.

# A warm welcome to all

## New Bellevue Aquatic Center's pool meets special needs

### BELLEVUE

BY J. MARTIN MCOMBER  
Seattle Times Eastside bureau

When the Bellevue Aquatic Center opens tomorrow, Joshua Harvitz will strap the orange life preserver around his chest and inch his wheelchair down the ramp until his weight disappears into the warm waters of the region's newest pool.

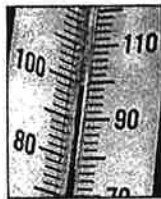
Floating is freedom for Harvitz, 21, bound to a wheelchair since nearly drowning 19 years ago, an accident that left him brain-damaged.

It is why he and his family hoped the city would build the warm-water pool that is at the heart of the \$3.2 million renovation of the old Odle swimming pool. And it is why Joshua hopes to be the first one to swim in it.

"For him, swimming is a wonderful sense of freedom," said Irene Harvitz, Joshua's mother and a well-known activist for the disabled. "It gives him the opportunity to be like everyone else."

The pool's 92-degree water will be a therapeutic haven for those in wheelchairs and those with arthritis, birth defects, sports injuries and a range of other needs.

There are only a handful of such pools in the Puget Sound area, most of them in private hands. Not only is Bellevue's open to all, but it also will be one of the most accessible warm-water pools in the Pacific Northwest.



around."

For that reason, the Aquatic Center probably will attract people from across King County and beyond.

About 1,000 people a day are expected to use the center. Most will swim in the traditional cool-water pool, which has received an extensive facelift and bright new colors.

But officials think about one-third will come to experience what they like to call "Warm Springs."

Designers put a lot of thought into the warm-water pool and dressing rooms. And it's the little touches, the kind of things most people wouldn't notice, that make it work.

"We really wanted to make it a place where someone with a disability can go from their car into the pool independently," said Dale Cook, project manager.

There is no curb to climb near the handicapped parking spots. The doors in the center are wide, with push-button access.

Inside the dressing rooms, people can slip into special pool wheelchairs, then safely lock up their own chairs

"This is a state-of-the-art facility for people with disabilities," said Parks Director Lee Springgate. "There is not another pool like this

### Grand opening

The Bellevue Aquatic Center celebrates its grand opening tomorrow from 1 to 4 p.m. with prizes, tours and free swimming. The center is at 601 143rd Ave. N.E., next to Odle Middle School. For more information, call 425-452-6803

in nearby stalls, some equipped with electrical outlets to recharge batteries.

The dressing benches are wide and deep, and the showers offer hand-held nozzles and curtains for privacy.

There is even a family dressing room, which eliminates the difficulty of choosing a changing room when people with a disability are not the same sex as their care-givers.

In the pool itself, the long, sloping steps and wheelchair ramp will ease people into the water. The air temperature is the same as the water's so bathers and swimmers — especially those with less muscle mass — won't get chills when they leave the pool.

Such touches aren't cheap. The city exhausted the entire \$3.2 million budget for building the center and is now selling commemorative tiles to finish the remaining detail work.

But Springgate is pleased that the project he and others have nursed along for the better part of 13 years is nearly finished.

After years of planning, voters approved a \$1 million bond in 1988 to build the warm-water pool. The city added another \$1 million. But finding a location turned out to be more difficult than anyone expected. Plans to put the pool at the Highland Community Center and the Bellevue YMCA fell through.

The problem was solved two years ago, when the county agreed to turn the Odle pool over to the city and contribute \$1.2 million toward building the warm-water pool. Work on the center began in May of last year.

"I'm absolutely convinced this will be an extremely successful pool," Springgate said.

It'll have to be, because the city is counting on the center to pay for itself. The county will spend \$558,000 to help cover the costs of running the pool for the first four years.

Prices for using the pool have climbed considerably since the remodel, but Mike Koenig, the center director, said the fees are still a bargain.

The drop-in rate is \$3 for adults and \$2 for children under 12. A three-month pass is \$120 for adults, \$80 for children, and \$190 for families. Single-parent family passes are \$150.

J. Martin McComber's phone message number is 206-515-5628. His e-mail address is: mcom-new@seattimes.com