

Nashville, Tennessee hands out millions in tax breaks for luxury water park

Warren Duzak**28 February 2017**

The Nashville/Davidson County City Council has voted to grant almost \$14 million in “tax incentives” for the construction of a private hotel water park which most residents of Nashville, Tennessee will not be able to use.

Ryman Hospitality Properties Inc. plans to build a \$90 million, 217,000 square-foot water park at its Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center north of downtown.

Despite the city’s \$13.8 million in tax breaks, the facility will only be open to hotel and resort guests. Rooms at the Gaylord Opryland Resort range from around \$150 to \$250 per night, well out of the price range most families can afford.

The water park, to be called SoundWaves, will include an adult bar area, live music, giant theater-sized television screens, a “lazy river” ride, wave pool, water slides, and food and bar services, according to Ryman CEO Colin Reed. In a press release, Reed described the project as “a major demand inducer for families and adult leisure guests looking for upscale recreation options.”

“This really, truly will be the first luxury water park of its kind in the United States of America,” Reed told the *Tennessean* newspaper. “This is a water park on steroids.”

The project is only the latest in a long history of handouts from public funds to corporations in Nashville, which heavily promotes its tourism industry. Like cities across the US and around the world, the local government has set priorities that express the vast class chasm that exists between the wealthy and an increasingly impoverished working class.

Nashville is one of the most unequal cities in the country. According to a 2015 Brookings Institution analysis of Census Bureau data, Nashville ranked sixth out of the 50 largest metropolitan areas for income disparity. Residents in the 95th percentile have an average annual income of around \$170,000, 7.9 times more than

those in the 20th percentile, who earn little more than \$21,000.

Even as the cost of housing and other necessities rises, the city functions to facilitate profit for companies like Ryman Hospitality Properties. “As the second largest property taxpayer in Davidson County,” Reed stated in the announcement of the project, “the agreement we are seeking with Metro Nashville would afford our Company a measure of predictability with regards to future tax obligations on our Opryland parcel as well as the opportunity to, over time, offset some of our initial, upfront investment.” The corporation has requested that Nashville freeze its property tax at 2017 levels for the next 8 years, along with other privileges.

Nashville is known as a “business friendly” city because of tax breaks given large corporations, sports teams and even television shows. The ABC television program “Nashville,” for example, received a total of more than \$33 million from the city and the state over four years in tax incentives and outright grants.

While the city is spending millions to promote a television program and a one-of-a-kind water park at a luxury hotel for the well-to-do, a majority of children in the city’s working class families are at risk of drowning because of having little or no swimming skills, according to the United States Swimming Foundation.

The study, conducted in 2010 by the University of Memphis in Memphis, Tennessee for the Foundation, revealed that 70 percent of African-American children surveyed and 60 percent of Hispanic children had little or no swimming skills, which put them at risk for drowning. Four out of 10 white children lacked the swimming skills necessary to avoid drowning, the study indicated.

Citing the Center for Disease Control, the Foundation noted that of the 10 people who drown every day in the United States, 2 of those are children younger than 14. African-American children drown at a rate 3 times higher

than children of other races, according to the CDC.

While virtually all mammals instinctively “swim” and can do so at birth—even if it is nothing more than a dog paddle—humans must be taught.

However, Nashville officials prefer to invest tax dollars for water-parks for the rich rather than basic social services, including teaching children how to swim. As income inequality grows and the standard of living of the working class continues its decline, access to free or affordable swimming pools and swimming lessons have been put beyond the reach of many working class families.

Nashville’s premier and centrally-located community/sports center is the Centennial Sportsplex, just across the street from Centennial Park, where the park’s outdoor public pool closed in the early 1960s rather than desegregate.

The Sportsplex is home to two indoor pools. One is an Olympic size pool that is reserved for lap swimming and swim teams practices of mainly private competitive swimming clubs and swim teams from private schools. A second smaller, “recreational” pool is more popular but is open for only limited hours during the week, on Saturdays and closed on Sundays. An annual individual membership is \$540 with a \$250 fee for the first dependent and \$150 for each additional dependent.

The YMCA, which has swimming pools, offers memberships for two adults and children for about \$1,300 a year. Swim lessons at Vanderbilt University in Nashville for 8-50 minute sessions is \$160, which may be about typical for the area.

The city’s “Wave Pool” is not centrally located, is open only in the summer and is designed with slides and, as the name implies, artificial waves. There are a few community center pools, but they are usually small and with infrequent hours.



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