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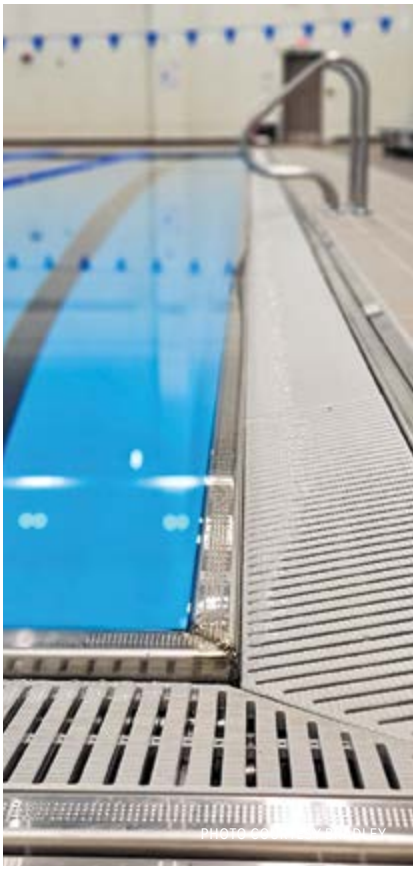
Recondition or Replace? Navigating Major Pool Decisions

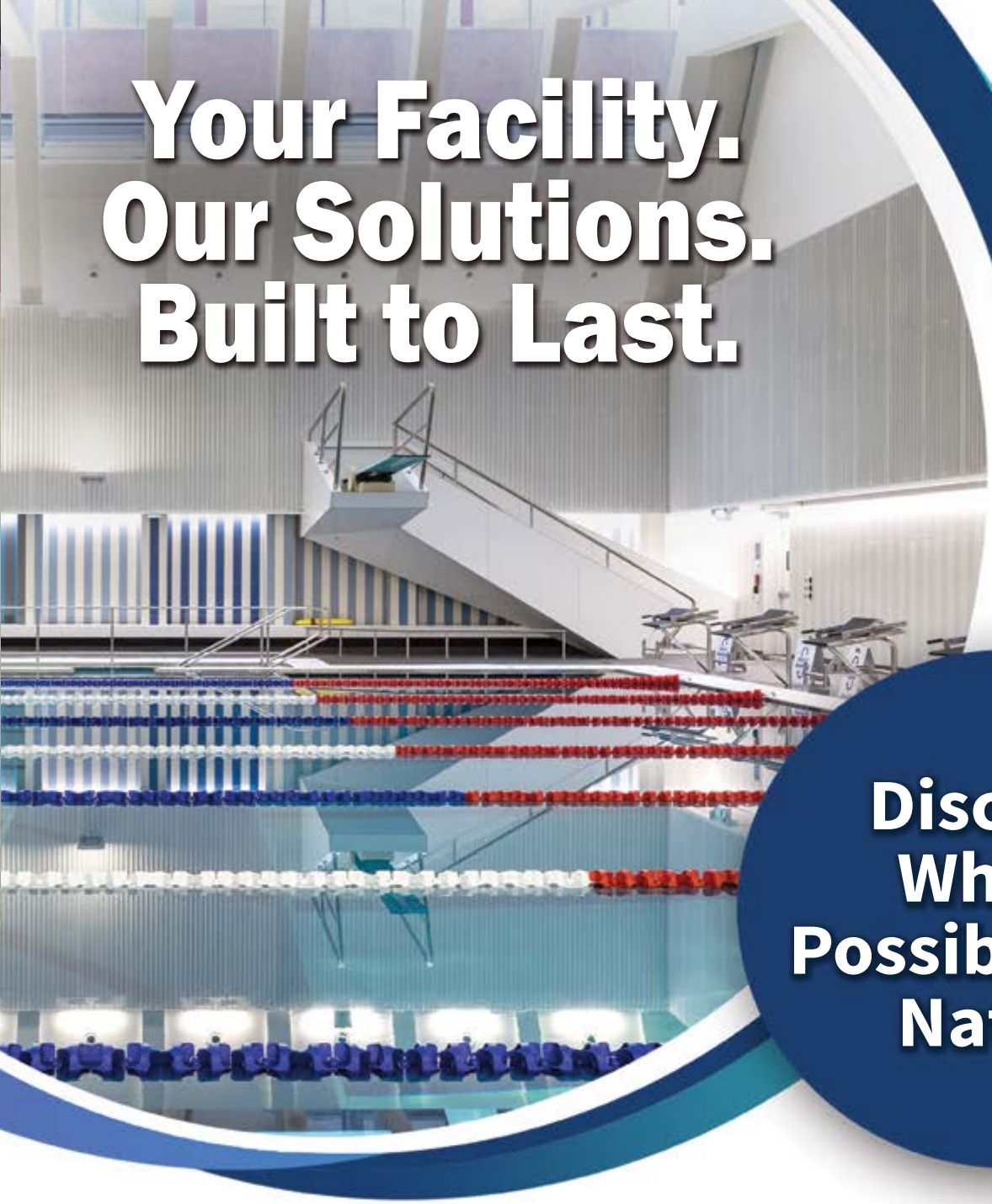
BY JOSHUA ALBERTSON

A quality aquatic facility can have a major impact on a private college or university's athletic program, but many university pools were built decades ago. Equipment and technology have come a long way since then—upgrades and reconditioning can give an existing pool new life.

But what happens when the pool seems to require constant repairs and may no longer be structurally sound? Now you're facing a difficult decision: repair or replace. Budget, safety, and a realistic assessment of an existing pool all affect what's right for your campus. Joshua Albertson of Natare Pools shares his experience to help facilities managers weigh the factors and make the best choice.

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PUPN: When should a college or university begin considering pool reconditioning? What are the most common signs that an existing pool is nearing the point where repairs or upgrades are no longer enough?

Albertson: There's some nuance to this question because every pool is different. In some cases, the decision is straightforward. When structural concerns begin to outweigh the cost of repairs, it's time to seriously consider your options. If you're facing major structural repairs or addressing the same issues for the second or third time, it may make more sense to start fresh rather than continue putting money into an aging pool.

PUPN: What are the most important factors in determining whether to recondition an existing pool or build a new one? How should facility managers weigh the pool's age, structural condition, remaining service life, and current maintenance costs?

Albertson: There isn't a one-size-fits-all answer. Budget, capital planning, and the overall condition of the pool all play a significant role. If you have a strong maintenance team and a budget that allows for ongoing repairs, it may make sense to extend the life of the existing pool. But ultimately, safety needs to come first. If the pool is no longer structurally sound or there are ongoing safety concerns, new construction may be the better long-term investment.

PUPN: How does the cost of reconditioning compare with new pool construction? Beyond the initial price tag, what long-term expenses—including energy, water, chemicals, labor, and ongoing maintenance—should campus administrators consider?

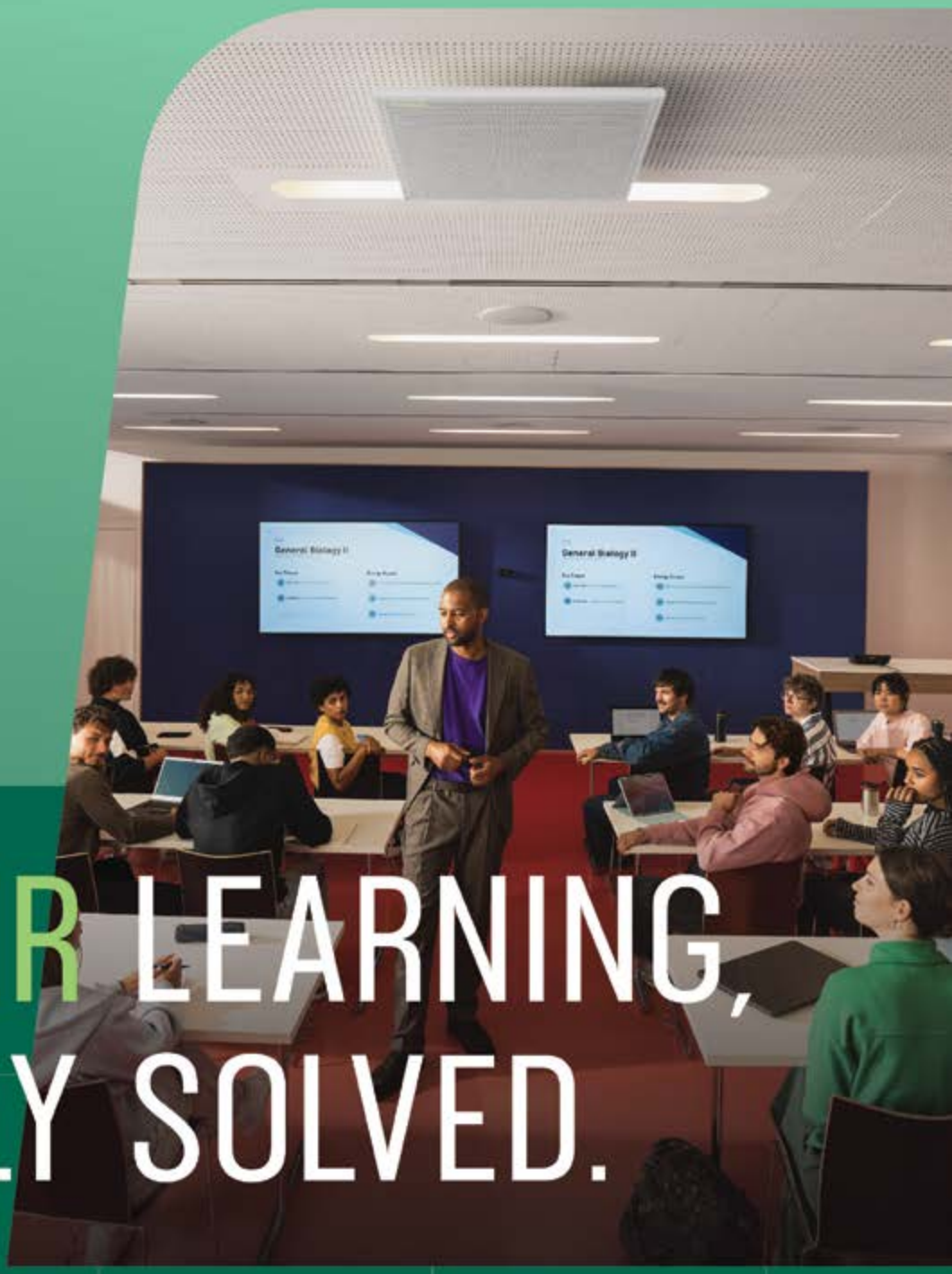
Albertson: In most cases, new construction will cost more upfront. The exception is when structural issues are so extensive that the repairs essentially become a complete rebuild. It's also important to look beyond the initial investment. Many university pools were built decades ago, and pool equipment and technology have come a long way since then. Renovating provides an opportunity to replace outdated, inefficient equipment with newer systems that can reduce water, energy, chemical, and maintenance costs. If the existing pool is leaking, addressing that alone can make a noticeable difference in water consumption and operating expenses.

PUPN: Which pool components can typically be reconditioned or upgraded successfully? For example, what options exist for resurfacing, replacing filtration systems, upgrading circulation equipment, repairing plumbing, or modernizing pool decks?

Albertson: Quite a few components can be repaired or upgraded without major demolition, especially when the pool's structure is still in good condition. Mechanical



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equipment, filtration and circulation systems, and interior finishes like plaster, tile, or PVC membrane can often be replaced or upgraded. Structural repairs involving the pool floor, walls, or deck are generally more involved. And if you're already planning to repair or replace the pool deck, that's a good opportunity to take a closer look at the perimeter plumbing. Addressing potential issues while that area is accessible can help avoid additional work down the road.

PUPN: When does an existing pool become a liability rather than an asset? What structural problems, recurring leaks, outdated systems, accessibility concerns, or safety issues might indicate that new construction is the smarter choice?

Albertson: When the pool's walls or floor begin to fail structurally, that's a major concern. Those types of repairs can be difficult and costly, and there comes a point when replacing the pool may make more sense.
But not every leak or maintenance issue means you need to start over. For example, if the pool structure is sound but the pool is leaking, installing a new PVC membrane system can provide a watertight finish while giving the pool a completely refreshed appearance.
Minor accessibility and safety issues can often be addressed with relatively little downtime. More significant concerns, however, need to be evaluated and addressed right away. The priority should always be providing a safe environment for everyone using the facility.

PUPN: How have modern pool technologies changed the reconditioning decision? Can upgrades to automation, energy-efficient pumps, filtration, water treatment, and controls significantly improve an older facility's performance and operating costs?
Albertson: Technology has certainly changed the aquatics industry, and there's no question that upgrading older equipment can improve efficiency and reduce operating costs. Newer pumps, filtration systems, automation, and controls can make a significant difference in how a facility operates.

But equipment upgrades are only part of the equation. If the pool has structural problems or is losing a significant amount of water, those issues need to be considered first. Universities need to look at the entire pool system and determine which improvements will have the greatest impact, both immediately and over the long term.

PUPN: How should colleges evaluate changing campus needs before committing to a project? What role do enrollment, competitive swimming, recreation programs, community use, accessibility, and future facility plans play in deciding whether to renovate or build new?

Albertson: All of those factors should be part of the conversation. One of the biggest challenges is balancing the needs of the general student population with those of the university's athletic programs. What works well for competitive swimming may not always be the best fit for recreation, instruction, or community use.

There's also a revenue component to consider. What programs or amenities will encourage people to use the facility? Swim meets, lessons, open swim sessions, and community events can all create additional opportunities for revenue.

And you can't overlook the impact a quality aquatic facility can have on athletics. Providing student-athletes with the right environment to train and compete can support a university's programs for years to come.

PUPN: What operational challenges should facility managers plan for during a reconditioning project or new construction? How can colleges minimize closures, manage seasonal schedules, control project costs, and reduce disruption to students, athletes, and staff?

Albertson: Communication is probably the most important part of managing any pool project. Facility managers need to understand how the pool is used, who depends on it, and when it absolutely needs to be available. For example, you wouldn't want to schedule a major renovation in the middle of swim season or right before an important meet.

No one likes having their routine interrupted, especially when it involves a facility they use regularly. Establishing a realistic project schedule, communicating closures well in advance, and keeping everyone informed throughout the process can go a long way toward minimizing frustration and disruption.

PUPN: What advice would you give a campus facility manager preparing to make this decision? What inspections, engineering assessments, life-cycle cost analyses, and contractor qualifications should be evaluated before presenting a recommendation to campus leadership?

Albertson: My biggest piece of advice is simple: talk to someone who knows pools. Start with an experienced aquatic consultant or a company that understands both renovation and new construction. Have the pool's condition evaluated, understand what repairs are needed, and look at what those improvements will cost over time compared to building new.

And don't hesitate to reach out to Natare. Our team's experience with pool renovations goes back to the 1970s, and we've encountered just about every type of challenge along the way. Whether you're looking for advice, trying to figure out where to start, or exploring your options, we're always happy to have that conversation.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Joshua Albertson is the Sales Manager at Natare Pools, bringing more than 16 years of experience in the aquatics industry, including the past 14 years with Natare. A graduate of Indiana University, he studied Recreational Sports Management and Aquatics Management. His experience and industry knowledge help clients navigate aquatic facility projects, from new construction to renovation and modernization.


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