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The Economic "Ripple Effect" on the Field of Aquatics: Not a Pretty Picture—Volume II (A Rebuttal?)

I am composing this viewpoint in response to an earlier editorial which was written during the summer of 2008. The editorial, titled *The Economic "Ripple Effect" on the Field of Aquatics: Not a Pretty Picture* appeared in *IJARE* in the November 2008 issue (volume 2, issue 4). The specific editorial focused on the anticipated ripple effect of $4+ per gallon gasoline costs, which were being paid at the pump at the time the editorial was written. The discussion centered on how the editorial writer anticipated the increasing cost of gasoline would likely have a negative influence on our aquatic programs, facilities, operations and the profession as a whole.

There is one caveat: the writer of the earlier editorial and the writer of this rebuttal editorial are the same person: me, J.B. Smith! This may be the one and only time you will read a counterpoint in which the opposing point of view and the original point of view are composed by the same person.

During the summer of 2008, when gasoline costs hit the record price per gallon and the major oil companies were reporting record profits, the whole country was in an uproar. Television shows ranging from early morning television (e.g., *Today*, *Good Morning America*) to the evening news shows to cable networks (e.g., CNN, Fox) all wrote and produced stories of varying shapes and forms to describe what was going on with gas prices and how this had occurred. What a surprise: as a result, Americans actually started to drive less, drive smarter, and conserve more. Vacation plans changed and airlines raised fares and applied surcharges and taxes to deal with the significant increases in their fuel costs. In so many different ways, Americans made major adjustments to their travel and ways of life.

So here we are, almost one year later. The cost of gas is down nearly 50% although it is on the rise as the summer driving season approaches. Who knows what it may be when you read this in August? Instead of paying more than $4 per gallon, for the past few months, most of us were paying slightly more than $2 per gallon for regular unleaded. When adjusted for inflation, the price per gallon of gasoline is far from the record highs of last year or even those of the 1980s. When we watch someone at a gas station filling up their gas guzzling SUV, many are no longer letting out shrieks of pain (as they were not too long ago) when they look at the final cost they must pay. Indeed, what a difference a few months can make.

So, was last summer's editorialist (me!) who sounded the alarm of "crisis in aquatics" incorrect? The price of gas along with airfares, housing prices, and interest rates have all gone down considerably. We have weathered the storm and aquatic professionals really don't have to worry, do they? There really are no ripple effects from the $4/gallon gas prices to the field of aquatics. Our jobs, our aquatic facilities, and our organizations are all safe. Last year's "bozo editorialist" was wacko, right? Wrong. Very wrong! Extremely wrong!!!

Unfortunately, the $4 per gallon cost was in essence a warm-up of what was to come. Yes, the price of gasoline has come down considerably, partially in response to our altered driving habits, but the economic events of the recent past actually make it a worse situation now for the field of aquatics than it was during the summer of 2008. In fact, it is much worse. Over the past six months (give or take a month or two), many aspects of the economy (both across our country and internationally) have crashed and continue to spiral downward. The Dow Jones Industrial average and the NASDAQ index have slid downward in an historic manner, losing anywhere from 25-50% of their previous values. That is trillions (with a "T") of dollars of lost value. Our individual stock portfolios on which we have been banking for retirement melted away with tremendous amounts of money literally evaporating before investors' eyes. People who had hoped to retire now or in the near future are now unable to do so. Some retirees have had to come out of retirement to find employment just to afford to eat and house themselves.

Unemployment, currently on a steep upward trend with no sign of topping out anytime soon, looks as though it might reach 10% nationally. In some economically depressed areas in the "auto belt" of Michigan and northwest Ohio, it already exceeds 15%. Each month for the past few months, over 500,000 employees across the country have lost their jobs. The "big three" auto companies are looking at closing dealerships in ways we have never seen before (on the day when I wrote this editorial, Chrysler, having already declared bankruptcy, announced the closing of 789 dealerships and GM was likely to announce the closing of 1,000 or more the next few days). One or more of our American automobile companies may even go out of business entirely. Even if they don't, they will look and act completely differently from anything we recognize in our lifetime.

As hard as this all may be to believe, the current economic status as I described over the last two paragraphs makes last summer's $4 per gallon of gas seem mild compared with today's economic climate. Whether it is due to gasoline prices or an overall deep recession, there is significant potential for negative consequences to the field of aquatics. It is the job and obligation of all aquatic professionals to attempt to "make lemonade out of the lemons." It would be unthinkable for aquatic professionals to simply give up and throw in the towel. By doing so would be a disservice to users of our services and our communities in general. Giving up and just closing our aquatic facilities or halting our learn-to-swim classes has the potential to make our world much less safe with higher potential for both accidents and accidental death. It is the mission of aquatic professionals to do our jobs to the best of our abilities so that we can provide quality programming and services to the community at large. And we cannot forget that aquatics itself is a vital part of the economy.

I think what aquatics professionals need to do is try to find the silver lining to what can be considered as a dark financial cloud at this time in our history. Instead of a vacation to a distant location, families may think about partaking in "staycations." There are few categories of activity that can provide such diverse and enjoyable opportunities as our aquatic field. For example, going to a summer water park can turn out to be a far less expensive endeavor than going away for any period of time. Potential day trips abound that can have an enjoyable aquatics theme. The fact must

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be accepted that enrollment in swimming lessons is in reality rather inexpensive, while providing long term benefits of improved health, fitness, and self-esteem. No matter what the degree of participation, aquatics can serve as pleasurable recreation activities for all members of our family and the general population.

It is the job of professionals of all “brands” of aquatics to see the glass as “half full” as compared to “half empty.” We must seize the opportunity to rescue the profession, save our jobs, and improve water safety for the population as a whole. Our goal must be to fulfill our professional obligation and mission to ourselves, our clients, and our communities in this time of potential economic hardship. Let’s go and get into the swim!

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