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In one of the toughest winters for businesses reliant on snow-based activities, there is one feel-good story in the small town of Bayfield. While businesses are seeing a decline in numbers and ski races are struggling to get to the starting line, the Bayfield Rec Center is having its best winter on record.

The Rec Center, a nonprofit that took over ownership of facilities from the Bayfield School District in 2022, reported a 110% increase in January memberships since 2022 — from 607 to 1,257 — and individual visits have increased from 1,889 to 3,931.

“But because we’re open more days and hours, you don’t feel the increase–there’s still plenty of room everyone,” said Natalie Davenport, member-engagement manager.

The increase is due in part to the snow-less winter but also because of small but crucial improvements. Through a strategic planning process, the board of directors identified the largest need within the community: more access on weekends and nights. With funding from one grantor, the center began opening on weekends and having the pool open seven days a week. With partial funding from Bayfield County Health and Human Services, it also implemented 24/7 access to the fitness facilities.

Stop in any time and you’ll find people participating in Senior Sneakers, working out with weights, taking swim lessons or a sauna, training for the Point to LaPointe open-water swim race, playing water polo or hanging out in the hot tub.

“The timing of these added features couldn’t have been better for this community,” Davenport said.

In 1985, philanthropist Mary Rice gifted the Bayfield Recreation Center to the community to be managed by the Bayfield School District. In 2006, Recreation and Fitness Resources, a non-profit organization, was formed to take over day-to-day operations from the Bayfield School District. In 2022 the Bayfield School District sold the building to RFR for $1.

At the time, RFR was told the building would need an extensive amount of work — estimates exceeding $600,000, said RFR Board President Chuck Finn. However, through a deeper dive and analysis, the board determined the building is in better shape than thought — with estimates closer to $200,000. RFR plans to begin a capital campaign later this year.

“A year ago, we thought we’d have to close the building for repairs but here we are open 24/7 with more people than ever using the facility,” said Finn. “And that feels really good.”

The RFR’s annual community fundraiser, the Polar Plunge, will be held March 2 at 2 p.m. in Bayfield. Plungers, volunteers, spectators and donors are all needed. It also has added a Color Run starting at 10 a.m. on the same day. Both events take place at the Bayfield Pavilion. For more information visit [bayfieldrec.org](http://bayfieldrec.org/).