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Summary of the Golf Community Discussion

Background

Several years ago, a suggestion was made by a city council member(s) questioning the need for four golf courses in the City of Rochester. A suggestion was made at that time that Soldiers Field Golf Course should/could be closed and repurposed or reduced to a 9-hole course. On January 3rd, 2022 a study session was held to hear the results of the National Golf Foundation (NGF) Study. The City Council asked questions and discussed the report, but there was concern raised by a number of us about the direction given to the consultant regarding the potential closing of a course, which one and why.

There was immediate public response and concerns were raised that the golf community itself had not been interviewed or queried prior to the release of the report. One of the powers of the mayor is to convene and due to my concern that the users and general public's input had not been included in the report – especially regarding potential solutions - I called together a group of golfers to review and discuss the recent National Golf Foundation (NGF) Study. Over the course of several online meetings, emails and phone calls to hear their ideas and concerns I determined that it would be appropriate to bring forward an overview of our discussion to the staff, Park Board and City Council. This document is my attempt to summarize the concerns and discussion. Additional materials, such as a history and a petition that I received are also attached.

Questions and Inquiry

I believe there are several *overarching questions* that the park board and city council should address that are broad in nature:

1.) *To what extent does the city want to subsidize Parks & Recreation and associated activities? How important is this department to our community?*

- *Does the city believe that P & R activities are a necessity and important to maintain a high quality of life/standard of living in our community?*
- *To what extent does the city subsidize the current various P & R activities (trails, parks, hockey, ice skating, swimming, tennis, golf, pickleball, disc golf, skiing, sledding, facilities) and venues (Graham Arena, Rec Center, 125 Live...)*
- *Is there parity in our subsidy of current activities, venues, amenities in spending and subsidy? Why or why not?*
- *What measurements or parameters are used to determine what is a priority among the many P & R activities, programs and venues?*

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- 2.) *When looking at the overall city budget, is P & R funded appropriately as a department?*
 - *What percent of the budget does P & R make up and does this represent our desires?*
 - *Do we need to revisit that percent based on the community's support for these amenities and projected increase use due to our projected growth?*

- 3.) *Is golf considered a sport, a leisure activity, a health-based activity, or a profit-based venture in Rochester?*

- 4.) *Do the P & R priorities align with the desires of the residents of Rochester?*
 - *New additions versus upgrading current stock*
 - *Upgrades to Soldiers Field Park vs Silver Lake Park vs Cascade Lake vs Gamehaven Park*
 - *Are neighborhood parks more important than regional or larger parks to users?*
 - *What data do we have on how many and where users/visitors go and what they want?*

- 5.) *Do we consider capital costs as part of ongoing city business to be paid for out of the city budget? Does that include P & R capital costs?*

- 6.) *Programming & Operational Cost Management...*
 - *Is it also expected to be paid for out of city costs or is there an expectation that activities requiring programming and/or staff that there be fees to offset that cost? And if so to what extent and is that relevant for **all** departments and **all** users?*
 - *What about park maintenance staff for mowing, repairs etc...?*

Golf specific questions

- 1.) *Do the P & R priorities for golf align with users of the golf courses?*
- 2.) *To what extent, given the answers determined above, would be an equitable and fair amount for the city to subsidize golf activities?*
- 3.) *We have a general understand of the number of users for golf courses. How does that number compare with numbers of folks using pools, parks, trails, tennis courses, hockey arenas etc?*
- 4.) *What factors do we believe should be used to determine the value of each individual course (accessibility, use, variety of offerings, access...) and was that part of the calculus in choosing which course to close should the city decide to close a course?*

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Points From The Meetings

- There was unanimous agreement that reducing or eliminating golf at Soldiers Field is not acceptable to the golfing community. The study confirms that Soldiers Field is the most used golfing facility of the four City golf courses, that it is very walkable and suited for golfers of all skill levels from beginner to seasoned players.
- Soldiers Field Golf Course is prime green space in the center of our city and once lost will likely never be able to be recaptured. The trees are great for carbon capture and provide an offset to heat island effects often found in city centers.
- Reducing or eliminating the golf facilities at Soldiers Field was not a specific recommendation of the NGF, but it was noted in the study as a consideration of the upcoming Soldiers Field Master Plan Project and potential long-term plans for downtown redevelopment.
- The NGF study uses a number of national standards that may not apply to golf in the northern tier of the US. Our weather and shorter season affect golf course use, just as it affect the use of our swimming pools, parks and other amenities more than other areas.
- Attendees felt that some of the NGF reported financial performance was incorrect or inaccurate as they did not include season pass revenue.
- Concern was expressed regarding the under-staffing of the golf maintenance staff.
- Questions were raised regarding the estimated capital needs and that the amounts are significantly over-stated. Including that a high-end clubhouse was not being requested or needed by golfers.
- Unlike many sports that we have and fund, golf is a lifetime sport. It is one activity that seniors can and do play year-around (although not here, thus snowbirds!) We should not dismiss an activity just because seniors are a significant user of our course! (Agist comments at the board table should be of concern.)
- There is a lack of computer software for scheduling, data collection. We need to get with the times for easier scheduling and better use of staff time!

It is suggested that the “Golf Discussion Group” develop a more in-depth review of the NGF study and be part of those that make recommendations for next steps. It was hoped that the P & R department would facilitate having these types of community and, especially, user discussions.

Additional comments, questions that came in outside of the meeting

- Soldiers Field has a modern club house built in 1994 and although SF is the oldest of the city golf *courses*, at this time does not need significant capital investment. The irrigation system may need replacement at some time in the future – the NGF suggests this may be an investment of \$1 million – so there should be a plan to either budget for this need, raise funds through alternative means, or determine that the course will continue as it is

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without further investment (knowing that this will cause a crisis needing to be addressed at some later date.)

- The NGF study uses a number of national standard measures to evaluate the Rochester City golf activity. Some of these standards suggest that the golf facilities in Rochester are under-utilized compared to their national norms. Given that Rochester is in the northern tier of the US, these standards may not apply in that our number of playable golf days is much shorter than golf courses in the mid to southern tiers of the US. (*Example, rounds played – NGF study page 25.*)
- There is recognition that season-pass holders have a significant discount over the daily fee players and this should be addressed moving forward. (Please note the table on season-pass cost per round – NGF study page 27.) It was suggested by this working group that ***an additional \$1-2 fee*** could be required of season-pass holders when they play at a course – these funds could be tracked (where season-pass holders play) *and* those funds could be set aside for a particular purpose or expenditure at that course (*your dollars at work!*). An additional caution was made to not assume that members play where they purchase their membership, as this is not necessarily the case!
- Concern was expressed regarding the reported financial performance of the individual courses in the study for Eastwood, NGF study page 43, for Northern Hills, NGF study page 56, and for Soldiers Field, NGF study page 69. In each case, the study suggests the courses lose money. However, this section of the study does not recognize season pass revenue and therefore misstates the financial performance of the individual courses. ***An accurate and clearer picture of the financial performance is presented on page 114 of the NGF study, where daily fee revenue and season pass revenue is recognized. This seems to have been lost on some who focus on the earlier descriptions of individual courses.***
- ***More season-pass holders play at Soldiers Field***, which impact the revenue reported - make certain that the season-pass dollars are properly proportioned to the courses most used so a more accurate usage and income picture can be demonstrated.
- A number of group members expressed concern regarding the understaffing of the course maintenance staff. In the past number of years, several positions have been eliminated from the maintenance staff. This is also recognized in the NGF study - page 3. Some recent maintenance staff reductions were a result of cuts needed by the City to deal with the financial hardship of the COVID pandemic in 2020 & 2021. None the less, the reduced staffing has led to a reduction of the course conditions that is unsustainable. Staffing levels should be returned to pre-covid levels and adjusted for wage inflation.
- A few members of the group shared that the capital investment needs suggested in the report are significantly overstated. Two examples were noted – the suggested cost of the

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irrigation system at Soldiers Field - \$1 million; and the repair of the drainage at Northern Hills - \$300,000. The drainage issue at Northern Hills was resolved this past fall after the study was completed and that amount was *considerably less* than suggested by the NGF study.

- Also, noted during our discussions was a concern raised regarding a recent Polco survey that focused on the ongoing Soldiers Field Master Planning process. This is not directly noted in the NGF study, however it is a concern to the golfing community. The Polco survey asked a number several questions regarding amenities that may be wanted by the community as a whole. No mention of golf was made in the survey, nor was there any suggestion that additional amenities may necessitate the elimination or reduction of the golf course. There is a view within the golfing community that the Polco survey was very misleading and biased – it did not accurately question the full range of options and choices.
- It was noted that both Morehead and Oronoco use tax levy to pay for their golf courses.

Talking with the Consultant

Rochester needs to decide whether it wants to treat golf *differently* than other park amenities *or the same*. Based on a *numbers-only* basis and given the addition of “for-profit” courses in the region, our numbers show that (*without making any changes*) our current usage supports two courses. ***We need to decide whether we want to utilize the suggestions in the NGF report such as upgrading technology, right-sizing staff, changing the fee structures, and doing better marketing and communications about our courses and their amenities (new restaurant, for instance!) in order to increase usage.*** These changes, which were delayed again this year, could drive more people to our four public courses, increase profits and allow us to upgrade course in preparation for our city’s future growth.

We have a 90% cost recovery on courses - \$270-\$300K/year!

The consultant stated that Hadley Creek is a great venue for young golfers and has a wonderful program – “First Tee” which has over 100 young kids learning the sport. This should be amplified and grown in order to have a community of golfers for the future.

We had an interesting discussion concerning whether we could/should consider having *Northern Hill, Soldiers Field and Eastwood* (where 70% of the rounds are played by season-pass holders) be part of an enterprise fund. Hadley Creek could be viewed as a separate (not part of the enterprise fund) course that is simply viewed as a youth and feeder course that is general fund paid for and subsidized? (Perhaps season-passes would not count there or would have a limited number or limited time of day use?)

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I queried whether we might hold an annual/semi-annual golf fundraiser to pay for some of our capitol expenditures on the courses. Similar to the big golf fundraisers non-profits do every year – it seems possible.

We could consider changing our fee structures to incent golfing at slow times, have discounted times for youth or working folks etc. Try a season-pass for after noon play only (25-50% discounted price) or a weekday-only pass! Move to a premium time structure. Try “after 12 pm reduced price golf passes (25-50% discount over regular passes). Offer “weekday only” passes. Be creative – see what other courses have successfully done – talk to the golfers and get their support!

We should *market what we have* and don't forget the communities outside of Rochester, our youth and our Mayo Clinic Visitors in that marketing!

Closing comments

It doesn't make sense to reduce any of the golf course amenities after they have been in use with a *smaller* population for so long. The City will likely grow another 55,000 people in the 25-30 years. Capital costs for clubhouses and irrigation systems will last for 50 years or more so it's a one-time expenditure for a product that we can then raise funds off of for sustainability and staff. Historically it appears that there have been only a few large golf capital investments in the last 40 years: Soldiers Field Clubhouse-1990's; Northern Hills Clubhouse 2018; Eastwood new Maintenance building 2010 – but at that time a developer paid for 100% and built the city a new better back nine with a new irrigation system and an improved driving range at no cost to the City and possibly Hadley Creek clubhouse - basically the developer built and paid for the course. The point here is that there are generally not many large-scale golf capital costs, but there are a few upon us that are one time. But think of all the benefits that the public has received over the last 60-70 years from other generations gifts to construct Soldiers, Northern and Eastwood.

Mayor's Narrative

In addition to all the points made above, I truly believe we need to answer the bigger questions about what we want for our community. That will then drive our decision-making. This land is valuable property for a number of reasons: its value as green space, its easy access to multiple park, sport and leisure activities and, possibly, for future growth beyond my lifetime.

I believe that our community values a high quality of life that includes a robust Park and Recreation Department. Golf is just one of many sport and leisure activities that we offer our residents and visitors. Many offerings (paths, parks, tennis, frisbee golf, pickleball, basketball, skating, lakes) are without charge and those that do charge seem to be held to a higher standard, which is unfair. One point not brought out previously is that our *public* amenities, including golf, are affordable compared to private options, leading to more equitable opportunities for those with limited income. Capitol costs are needed for ALL of these activities, and we must create

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and use a comprehensive CIP for Parks and Recreation that is funded by the general fund, fees referendum and levies just as we do our other obligations.

I also hope that we should utilize our Golf Courses better in the winter for winter sport uses. We should heed the advice of the NGF report and use modern technology. We must advertise and market our products and their value broadly, including outside our community. We may have to try incentives and funding schemes to best entice new users as well as satisfy annual members. Let's TRY somethings and "fail fast", rather than keep doing the same thing and then wring our hands that it's not enough. Let's plan for the future growth, by replacing our aging pools, maintaining our golf courses, and using the referendum funds across the city to enhance the experience of ALL users in EVERY neighborhood. Let's not ADD new items until we have found a way to support what we already have. Let's utilize the community members who use our parks, trails and facilities to tell us what they want and how they will help us prioritize funds to get what we want for our community's best interest.

We should dismiss the idea of cutting a golf course, adjust income streams if needed to keep what we have, and prioritize what *the community and users* want us to do to maintain a high quality of life that draws people here to live, work and visit.

Moving Ahead

The "Golf Working Group" and other users would benefit from the opportunity to have a more in-depth review of the NGF study and the group could be charged with making recommendations to the Mayor, City Council and staff regarding action steps for Rochester municipal golf beyond the comments listed above. They are willing to be part of the solution and welcome, like so many of the community who love and use our Park & Recreation offerings, being invited to the table to help!