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BYPASS ST. PETER: How to Have a Heavenly Municipal Golf Course!

Taking out the politics can lead to a better public golf facility.

by **PATRICK M. O'BRIEN**

*"Municipal golf is one of this country's least appreciated sports traditions. Instead of lavishing praise for the latest and greatest upscale private club, we ought to think more about affordable access to quality courses near where many people actually live." – Bradley S. Klein, Editor, *Golfweek's Superintendent News*.*

MUNICIPAL GOLF COURSES have been filling the need for affordable golf in the United States for more than 100 years. Today, 21 million of an estimated 26.5 million golfers in the United States play their

golf on public-access courses. The demand for green fees under \$40 at municipal courses is staggering.

Unfortunately, a crisis exists today at many municipal golf courses. Poor management and local politics have resulted in unacceptable playing conditions. Excess golf revenues are being diverted to other recreational activities or into the pockets of management companies.

Despite these problems, most municipal golf courses will continue to offer good quality at fair prices. This article reviews the most common mistakes made and examines four case

studies of municipal golf courses that have turned things around. Finally, a list of suggestions is provided to help any municipal course get on the road to success.

The History of Municipal Golf

Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx, N.Y., was built in 1895 and is the oldest municipal golf course in the United States. Thousands of municipal courses have been built since then, and they have provided millions of men, women, and children of all backgrounds with a place to learn the game. Historically, municipal golf courses were operated

by local parks and recreational departments along with other field sport facilities, swimming pools, tennis courts, and area parks. These facilities, including golf courses, were viewed as recreational centers for the local citizens and were supported by tax dollars.

As golf increased in popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, revenues at golf courses boomed. Local politicians began to view their courses as a source of revenue to fund other local recreational programs and facilities. At the same time, politicians bowed to public pressure and reduced fees through the establishment of under-priced annual passes for local residents. Municipal golf courses were directed to operate as businesses, but they were not allowed



Public golfers are becoming more demanding of better golf course conditions at municipal facilities.



Over the last few years of the lease, the number of rounds of golf had shrunk from 40,000 to the mid-20s as the reputation of the facility diminished in the community due to poor management. The city decided to take over the facility again and formed the Cottonwood Creek Citizens Advisory Board. Each Waco city council person appointed two members to this independent board. A total of 12 persons serve two-year appointments, with six appointments made each year. The Board is composed of all social and economic classes, and both public and private golfers. The perspectives and input from this diverse group have been invaluable. Board meetings are held monthly, usually over lunch, and generally last 90 minutes. Agenda items are discussed and recommendations made to the staff and city council on all aspects of the golf facility.

The Advisory Board took a proactive role and made a determination to reestablish Cottonwood Creek Golf Course as the premier municipal facility in central Texas. The Advisory Board's goal was to set the standard in central Texas for high quality, affordable golf. A mission statement was adopted that reads, "To provide a high quality and affordable golfing experience for central Texas golfers and a golfing facility that provides enjoyment and challenge for golfers of all skill levels," according to Michael Copp, Advisory Board Chairman. The Board then identified and prioritized areas of need and developed a five-year strategic plan to accomplish this mission. The areas of concern in

to use their profits for course improvements, nor could they set fees that were commensurate with the service they were providing. When this occurred, course conditions frequently began to spiral downward rapidly.

When a course hits bottom, the first attempt by local officials at upgrading often is to hire a professional management company to manage the entire golf course and to minimize the politics. Surveys taken prior to 1995 by the Reason Public Policy Institute indicate this trend. The number of privately managed government courses increased 67% from 1987 to 1995, with approximately 25% of all cities employing a management company.

However, the latest trend is away from management companies and toward operation of the courses as a municipal enterprise fund. An enterprise fund is a process of funding the

golf course or other municipal service solely through the revenues it generates and without the benefit of taxpayer support. Quasi-independent golf course advisory boards are often established, and they control accounts funded by golf course revenues. Cities are finding out that they can create more efficient, better-maintained courses with fewer political disputes when using the enterprise fund model. Here are a few real-life examples of successful municipal golf courses:

Municipal Enterprise Fund Case Studies

#1 Cottonwood Creek Golf Course (Texas)

The Cottonwood Creek Golf Course in Waco, Texas, was built in the middle 1980s by the city and immediately was leased to a management company.

order of priority were: (1) reconstruction of all putting greens, (2) installation of concrete cart paths throughout all 18 holes, (3) renovation of all bunkers, (4) new maintenance equipment acquisition, (5) update and improve the irrigation system, (6) tree planting and entrance beautification, and (7) new perimeter fencing in select areas. The putting green renovation and reconstruction was completed within months. Cart paths have been installed on the front nine holes, and the back nine holes are nearing completion. Some trees were removed and in other areas new trees were planted. A beautiful new entrance gate and landscaping were put in place. Course maintenance personnel have begun bunker renovation, with several of the bunkers already completed. The irrigation system is next in line to be addressed.

The General Manager at Cottonwood Creek Golf Course, a city employee in the Department of Parks and Recreation, is responsible for the budget. All revenues from the golf course are reallocated back into the facility. The city has been providing temporary subsidies due to the major capital expenditures needed to rejuvenate the course. The annual operational statements are brought to the Advisory Board for recommendations. The City Council ultimately approves the final budget and capital expenditures and generally approves the recommendations of the Advisory Board.

The changes in conditions have made a dramatic turnaround. In less than two years time, the number of rounds of golf has increased again to over 43,000, with a continuing steady monthly increase trend.

#2 Chicopee Woods Golf Course (Georgia)

Hall County is a major metropolitan area northeast of Atlanta, Georgia. An 18-hole golf course was built in 1991 on land given to the county by the Johnson & Johnson Company. Over the past 10 years, the golf course has operated with no tax dollars under the jurisdiction of the Chicopee Woods Parks Commission, a subdivision of the State of Georgia. A Green Committee set up by the Parks Commission acts as the governing board that establishes fees, rules, and regulations for the golf course. A charter (Table 1) provides the basic philosophies that the Green Committee carries out. Chicopee Woods is well known in the Atlanta area for its affordable green fees and quality turf

**Table 1
Chicopee Woods Golf Course Charter**

Our Charter is to provide a quality golf facility for the public golfer. This includes all citizens of Hall County and surrounding communities. It shall be our goal to provide a facility that is in very good condition at a reasonable cost to our players.

In addition, we pledge the following:

1. We shall be financially self-supporting for operational expenses.
2. We will be conscious of environmental concerns and operate the golf course in a manner that will not only protect the natural environment, but will enhance the natural environment whenever and wherever possible.
3. We will support the Chicopee Woods Park Commission with a percentage of our gross income each and every year. This money will be spent in whatever manner the Chicopee Woods Park Commission deems appropriate.
4. We will always try to treat the customers of Chicopee Woods Golf Course with friendly service that is beyond their expectations.
5. We will promote golf within our community as a healthy activity, especially for younger people.
6. We will attempt to provide our full-time employees with benefits that are comparable to local government and/or local private enterprise.
7. To change this Charter (after initial formulation) would require a unanimous approval of the Green Committee.

conditions, and it attracts over 45,000 rounds of golf annually.

The key to the success of this golf facility has been the governing structure under the direction of the Green Committee. All revenue from the golf course, including green fees, cart fees, and driving range fees, is deposited into a reserve account. An income and expense balance sheet for the 2000 golf season is shown in Table 2. Funds from a special reserve account are used for golf carts, landscaping, maintenance equipment, capital improvements, golf course expansion, and golf cart paths. The Budget and Finance Committee, made up of the Vice Chairman and the Treasurer of the Green Committee, prepares the annual budget for submission to the Green Committee with assistance from Dave Feser, golf superintendent, and Jim Arendt, golf professional. All financial information is public and given to the city and county officials, and is audited annually.

Overall, the Green Committee consists of nine members who live in the community and have been appointed by the Parks Commission. Each member is appointed for a three-year term, and each member may serve a second term. The Chairman serves a two-year term. The Green Committee also hires the golf course superintendent and golf professional. At the monthly meetings,

**Table 2
Chicopee Woods
Fiscal Year 2000 Facility Budget**

Income	\$1,350,000
Expenses	
Golf Course Maintenance	\$ 650,000
General Operations	\$ 400,000
Reserve Fund (will be spent in fiscal year 2001)	\$ 300,000

long-range plans, fees, and other topics are discussed and reviewed by the Green Committee. This "citizen committee" system works at Chicopee Woods and helps to insure quality golf for the public golfer. Chicopee Woods is currently building a third nine holes, designed by course architect Dennis Griffiths. This will be financed by a bank loan and paid for within 13 years from generated revenues. Truly a success!

#3 Olde Barnstable Fairgrounds Golf Course (Massachusetts)

The Olde Barnstable Fairgrounds Golf Course, built in 1991, has set up an Enterprise Account Fund to operate this popular golf facility in the town

of Barnstable, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod. Olde Barnstable Fairgrounds has a reputation as one of the best municipal facilities in the Northeast. The course averages over 63,000 rounds per year and has a modest budget of approximately \$550,000 annually. The town oversees the Enterprise Account and an independent Golf Advisory Committee made up of concerned citizens of the town meets monthly to discuss potential issues facing the facility. The seven-member Golf Advisory Committee has several sub-committees to deal with tournaments, fee schedules, budgetary issues, etc., and makes recommendations regarding long- and short-range planning.

The golf course is operated without any tax-generated revenue and spends what it makes. It is fully responsible for all debt service and bonds. The golf facility charter includes a goal to provide reasonable green fees for the residents of the community. Non-residents are charged higher fees, and approximately 25% of the annual play comes from this income source that generates a significant portion of the annual revenue. With the popularity of golf in this resort town, a certain percentage of the daily tee times are allocated for non-resident play due to their income value. Every holiday and weekend day in the summer typically is sold out for these tee times, and if any

openings come about, they are offered to residents first.

The golf course operates out of the Department of Recreation, with the Pro/Manager at the golf facility, Gary Philbrick, PGA professional, reporting to the Recreation Director. Bruce McIntyre, CGCS, is the golf superintendent who carries out the capital improvements and directs the daily course operations. The Pro/Manager and Golf Course Superintendent develop the annual budget and make recommendations for how to spend the money in the Enterprise Account through the Recreation Director. After the Recreation Director and Golf Advisory Board review the budget, it is passed on to the Town Manager, who generally approves the proposed budget. The Town Manager will then take the budget to the Town Council for final approval. In 1999, capital improvements for cart paths, new equipment, and irrigation improvements totaling over \$200,000 were completed, with an approximate \$100,000 surplus left in the Enterprise Account. These funds will be spent next year for additional course improvements or debt service.

One major decision that really has promoted quality turf conditions with the high play is the fee system. Green fees for residents average between \$29 and \$36 for 18 holes, while non-resident fees are between \$55 and \$69.

Annual passes and discounts are available for residents of the town for \$595, and a "punch ticket" for 10 rounds can be purchased for \$225. Junior passes are also available for \$195 annually, and this includes college students. Seniors purchase 70% of the annual passes.

#4 Monmouth County Golf Courses (New Jersey)

The Monmouth County Park System in central New Jersey has seven golf courses, including two facilities (Hominy Hill and Howell Park) in the *Golf Digest* Top 50 Public Courses. Dave Pease, General Manager of the MCPS Golf Courses, places a premium on course conditions. This management philosophy provides the best playing conditions possible for the daily-fee patron. Every facility is operated with annual budgets in the range of \$700,000 to \$800,000. The successes of the management programs are based on the continuous support from all departments and administrations. Most importantly, the Board of Recreation Commissioners, an independent commission within the Department of Parks, has been a big plus for the famous conditions at these facilities.

This board consists of 10 members appointed by the Board of Chosen Freeholders, who are elected county officials. Since the appointment is for a lifetime and without pay, only individuals who have a vested interest in the county are chosen. The appointees come from all types of backgrounds, including blue-collar workers and professionals. The lifetime appointments help to insure a stable infrastructure.

The Board of Recreational Commissioners is primarily a policy-making board rather than a working board. This board meets twice monthly and sets the direction not only for the golf facilities, but also the rest of the Monmouth County park system. A few of their important responsibilities include approving course policies, operational and capital budgets, contract approval, and long-range plans. The golf course staff drafts all golf course budget issues for the Board of Recreation Commissioners, and Mr. Pease serves as a technical advisor for golf course operations. "I keep the wheel greased for golf expenditures," explained Mr. Pease, "as all the recreational heads want a piece of the pie." Final decisions regarding the budget rest with the Board of Recreation Commissioners, but they must operate within the budget set by the Board of Chosen Freeholders.



Whether the golf course is a municipal or private facility, periodic renovations are important. A new concrete cart path project was financed at Chicopee Woods G.C. by revenues from the reserve account.

Funds to operate the golf courses come from the green fees, cart fees, and pro shop sales, and are deposited into the county treasury, but several trust funds also exist that retain a percentage of certain revenues for capital improvements. Non-resident green fees are double those of the county residents at each of the seven golf courses, and these fees usually generate 40% of the total revenue, even though non-residents are only 15% to 20% of the total play. Overall, every dollar generated by the seven golf facilities is returned to golf from the county treasury and trust funds.

The system works very well in Monmouth County, and over 50,000 rounds are played annually at each facility. The major complaint from the public is that “you can’t get a tee time” and *not* that “there isn’t any turf on the tees.”

Other Tips for Success for Public Golf Courses

Municipal golf courses are a big business today, but they still offer the best opportunity to introduce new golfers to the game. The municipal facilities profiled in this article have experienced firsthand the challenges encountered with the operation of golf courses and have shared a few tips to help others stay on the road to success.

Administrative

- Find public-spirited golfers who play on your course and live in your community to serve on your advisory board.

- Appoint citizens with varying playing ability.

- Consider small business people, accountants, superintendents, attorneys, and others who may have skills that you could draw upon.

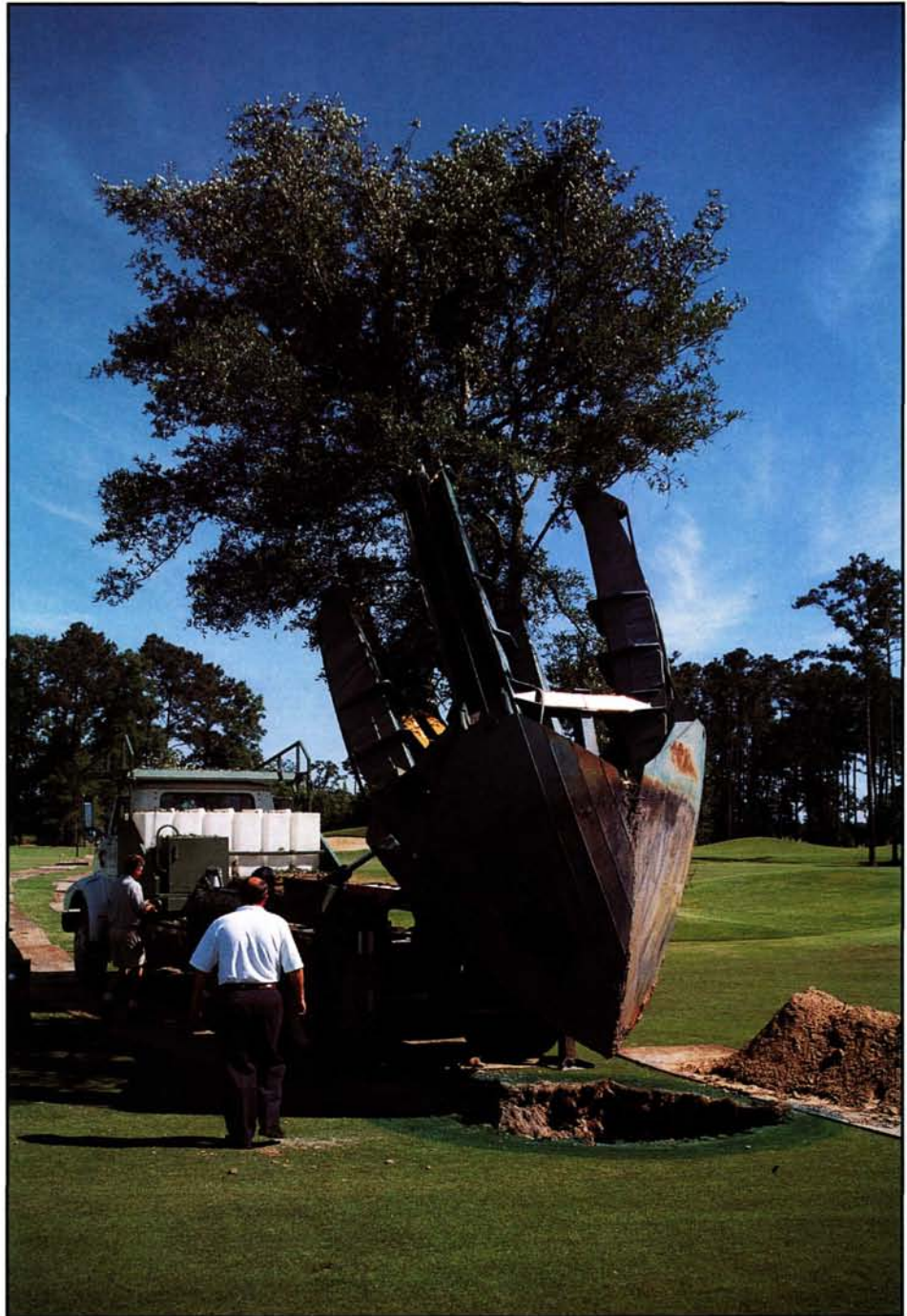
- Select as your first chairperson a very strong individual with strong organizational skills.

- Appoint positive people to your governing board, not those who just complain.

- Write a charter with your purpose clearly stated.

- Hire the very best employees you can afford. Remember, excellent employees will pay their way, while poor employees will not be cost effective.

- Make the playability of the golf course your top priority when budgeting any funds, either operational or for capital improvements. Eventually, the golf course reputation and consequent play will be able to pay for a few frills.



Make some improvements on the golf course each year. Critically evaluate expenditures to allocate money to the appropriate area.

- Keep “clubhouse” operations to a minimum! Remember, golfers come to play golf.

- Remember that you are in a competitive situation with other golf courses and, as government or municipal operations, your only conflict might be that you have a community obligation to provide for the young, the old, and the disadvantaged. This does not mean cheap golf for the average player.

- Raise your income through an increase in fees each year – perhaps a

minimum of 3% to 5%, and slightly more if you want to make some capital improvements.

- Consider a discount for people from your political jurisdiction.

- Stay strictly daily fee.

- Do not issue season tickets.

- Do not “yo-yo” prices, i.e., not increase fees for three or four years and then make a 20% increase.

- Do not spend money for “fancy” when you don’t have the basics.

- Keep track of financial ratios and differences from year to year. Example:



Chicopee Woods Golf Course (Georgia) operates under the jurisdiction of the Chicopee Woods Parks Commission. A Green Committee, established by the Parks Commission, conducts monthly meetings to establish fees and rules, review current activities on the golf course, and discuss long-range plans.

Total income divided by rounds played equals dollars brought in by an average customer. Is this number going up or down from year to year? This can be done with many different sets of numbers and tracked.

- Remember to act as much as possible as any for-profit business would.

- Price yourself at an optimum, i.e., not so high you can't attract players and not so low that you either leave money on the table or can't give a reasonable quality product.

- Be flexible with issues regarding unions, bureaucracy, and difficult clientele.

- Hire rangers to police the players and ensure that customers follow the philosophies of the facility.

Golf Maintenance

- Make golf course maintenance the highest priority.

- Keep uniform playing conditions throughout the golf course.

- Do not attempt to have the "perfect" conditions of TV golf, but do have good playing conditions throughout the golf course, in this order: putting greens, tees, bunkers, fairways, and rough.

- Make fertilizer applications somewhere between adequate and optimum for turf growth. Too much is a waste, and too little will not give the results desired and therefore is almost a waste, too!

- Chemical plant protectant applications should be made only if absolutely needed.

- Accept some turf damage or weed infestations before initiating control measures.

- Consider spot applications of fertilizers, herbicides and other plant protectants.

- Hire an excellent mechanic and make equipment maintenance a very high priority.

- Do not plant roses if you don't have good turf!

- Dream but be practical.

- Make some course improvements each year.

- Decide where to spend capital monies by evaluating if this expenditure will tend to increase or decrease operational budgets. This is not always easy, but it is very important if funds are hard to come by. For instance, permanently correcting a bunker that is routinely eroded by washouts will reduce operational costs while a pretty flower bed or fountain will tend to raise operating costs. Those kinds of expenditures may be needed, but consider them carefully!

- Remember that golfers come to your course to play golf. Invest as much as possible in the golf course turf conditions.

- Don't spend large amounts of money on architectural improvements if they are really not needed.

- Consult annually with a USGA agronomist to find out the latest information about turfgrass management, new products, and trends.

- Use the largest turf equipment practical. This helps to keep labor costs down.

- Have backups for your most important pieces of equipment.

- Don't compromise on the necessities of fertilization, weed control, aeration, and divot repair.

- Hire a top-notch assistant superintendent.

- Don't let the attitude of "I don't care" develop. Superintendents must be motivated and they, in turn, motivate the crew.

- As a superintendent, be seen and communicate with the golfers. There is a need for constant education.

- Don't give in to the vocal minority. Develop a good agronomic plan and stick to it.

- Mandate the use of non-metal spikes to reduce wear on the course.

- Set up maintenance work schedules to avoid conflict between the workers and golfers during the course of normal daily grooming activities.

Conclusion

The public has a deep-rooted perception that municipal golf is low quality. Times have changed, and many municipalities are providing affordable, accessible, and better-conditioned golf courses for the public golfer. In fact, the 2002 U.S. Open will be played at the Black Course at Bethpage State Park, a state-operated golf course.

There is hope for any municipal facility in need of improvements by following the advice and case studies in this article. Municipal golf courses are still the perfect venue to teach new golfers the traditions and proper etiquette of play in an affordable and safe environment. Today's government officials might not be able to get you to heaven, but there is no reason why they can't provide a heavenly golf course.

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PATRICK M. O'BRIEN is Director of the USGA Green Section's Southeast Region. His golf career started at the North Park Municipal Golf Course, owned by Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh.