Recognizing, preserving golf courses as open space

BY DAVID MACDONALD

I see golf courses in a different light than most of you. I don't play golf, but I do enjoy hiking, fishing, sledding and cross-country skiing. I value greatly three nearby golf courses that provide undeveloped open space for these and other outdoor activities to our local communities.

Golfers and conservationists are forging new partnerships, including the New York Audubon Society's efforts to preserve natural habitats — through its Golf Course Wildlife Sanctuary Program — and on Kiawah Island in South Carolina, where it recently took over stewardship of the Ocean Course.

In addition to the three golf courses, our community also happens to be the home of Acadia National Park, which offers some of the most diverse outdoor opportunities in the nation, drawing millions of visitors each year. Even in such a setting, with dozens of mountain trails and miles of shoreline from which to choose, golf courses hold their own as providers of significant open, recreational space.

What makes the courses so appealing as community open space is they usually back right up to the village — you can walk to them. Better yet, around here, the other side of the course often abuts an Acadia National Park boundary. The open space serves

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as a link between the downtowns and the Park, and a buffer to the natural values preserved within Acadia.

In Northeast Harbor, the private golf club is set amidst a network of trails that link the different parts of the village to the Park and to town-owned land on Schoolhouse Ledge. Weathered cedar signs directing a hiker to Norumbega Mountain or Hadlock Pond stand beside the clean white arrows directing the golfer to the next tee. I know one woman who is a full-paying member of the club, not because she plays golf there, but because she walks her dogs there on her way to the trails of Acadia.

Kebow Valley Golf Club in Bar Harbor is a public course renowned for its history and scenery, but it is probably best loved by locals for its sledding hills, in particular the famed Big Bunker on number 17 — where President William Howard Taft once took a 17.

Like the Northeast Harbor links, Kebow is strategically placed between fully-developed residential areas and the pristine woods of Acadia. Numerous hiking trails and the popular Park loop motor road are within a wedge of Kebow's back nine.

Unlike the other two courses, the Causeway Club in Southwest Harbor includes shorefront property, wrapping around the eastern shore of Norwood Cove and linked to a nearby peninsula by a granite causeway and foot-bridge. The causeway itself and its continuation onto club land — one of the most scenic spots in the area, providing a favorite loop walk from the village, with views out to the Western Way and islands beyond.

All three courses are great places to play golf; the other traditional uses enjoyed by locals do not compromise the clubs' ability to serve their members. Golf clearly comes first here, yet the season is short in eastern Maine and the general public is able to enjoy the benefits of the open space year round.

Until I began working in the field of land conservation, I never considered that golf courses might not always remain as open spaces, but rather by looking at a property's "highest and best" potential use, financially and according to its current use, but rather by looking at a property's "highest and best" potential use, financially — which, in most cases, is development. Golf courses here on Mount Desert Island are facing increasing tax revaluations and, their fates should not be left to chance.

Owners and managers of golf clubs that are facing increasing tax revaluations and, status of the adjacent open space.

Like farmland, golf courses possess qualities that make them especially attractive for development: good soils, easy access, land already cleared of trees and leveled for building sites and, of course, the amenity of the adjacent open space.

Owners and managers of golf clubs that have maintained these areas as successful courses and valuable open spaces deserve our thanks. They should also be urged to consider conservation options to ensure that future generations are able to enjoy the public benefits of open land.

Our nearby golf courses seem like local parks for at least half the year. My own experiences of fishing in Hadlock Brook, sledding on Big Bunker, and watching the tide rush in and out beneath the Causeway indicate to me how much these places mean to our local communities. The open space values of golf courses will only grow with time, and their fates should not be left to chance.

McDonald comment
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