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Audubon's new National Turfgrass Evaluation Program (NTEP), only two of three are even in the top 10 and only three of its public courses to non-profit operation, Cooke said. Newark, N.J., officials visited Cooke in early July and are seriously considering establishing a non-profit organization, Cooke said.

Cities turn to non-profit management groups
Seattle recently turned over operation of its three public courses to a newly formed, non-profit corporation, a move being considered in a growing number of U.S. cities.

"It gaining favor throughout the country because it works," said Lynnie Cooke, founder and chairman of the City of Seattle Golf Corp., which is frequently cited as a model operation by non-profit advocates.

Since assuming control in 1985, BMGC has made $4.5 million in improvements to the city's five golf facilities and is planning a sixth course, all at no expense to taxpayers. Annual rounds increased from 195,000 in 1984 to 558,000 in 1990. Green fees, reportedly the lowest among major municipal layouts in the Mid-Atlantic, have remained at $10.50 since 1987. Two of its courses, Pine Ridge and Mt. Pleasant, are generally considered among the top 10 public layouts in Maryland, Pennsylvania, Delaware and Virginia.

In light of Baltimore's success, Indianapolis is set to hand over the reins to three of its public courses to a non-profit organization, Cooke said.

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Non-profits

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non-profit entity to run their three Essex County layouts. "I get calls from all over the country asking how we did it here," the Baltimore executive said. With cities having problems running their own facilities, and many 10-to-15-year management contracts with private firms set to expire, this is an alternative many cities are exploring, he added.

Fed up with the deteriorating condition of its facilities — Jefferson Park, Jackson Park and West Seattle — the Seattle Golf Community and the city decided to do something, recalled Chris Redo, chief executive officer of Municipal Golf of Seattle, the non-profit group that took over the municipal courses July 1. Redo was also part of an 11-member, volunteer advisory board the city established last September to explore alternatives.

The board settled on four options, Redo explained. They were:

• Retain the concessionaire who had allowed the courses to deteriorate. "That wasn't acceptable," Redo said.

• Hire a national, for-profit management company, e.g. American Golf Corp. or ClubCorp. "They do a good job. But we didn't want the money generated by our courses leaving the community," Redo said.

• Establish a public development authority (PDA), which would seek private investors to put up money for renovations and operations in return for a hefty return on their investment. Seattle had a bad experience with a PDA that renovated Pike Place Market, a popular farmer's market. "They raised the rents so high that people were forced out of business," Redo said. The advisory board feared a PDA could dramatically increase green fees to recover its investment rather than keep fees affordable.

• Establish a non-profit organization that would keep fees affordable while reinvesting profits toward the $20 million in capital improvements that had been suggested in the city's master plan but were largely ignored by the previous operator.

The advisory board chose the non-profit route. This past winter, Redo resigned from the board and was eventually named CEO of Municipal Golf of Seattle, which received a 10 1/2-year contract beginning July 1.

Redo is confident the company can turn the Seattle situation around. But one major roadblock exists, he admitted. The City Council required that unionized city employees continue to maintain the facilities. The city did assign a liaison to act as a conduit between the maintenance staff and the firm, and also agreed to place only employees who had expressed a genuine interest in course maintenance at the facilities. But city politicians would not give Municipal Golf the authority to replace city workers with the company's own employees.

"The city charter forbids anyone but municipal employees from working on city-owned facilities," Redo explained. "We basically have to buy our services from the city. Those unionized labor costs are much higher than a privately-owned, daily-fee operation would have to pay for the same services. It will be quite a challenge to keep our green fees low and our costs in line."

Baltimore Municipal Golf Corp. doesn't labor under such restrictions, Redo pointed out. When it was first established, then-Mayor William Donald Schaefer and the City Council withstood considerable public and media pressure and freed BMWG to hire whoever it wished. BMWG offered to retain the entire maintenance staff, although at reduced pay and benefits, Cooke explained. Of the 129 full-time employees, only three chose to stay. The full-time maintenance staff now stands at 64, but part-time employees have grown to 273. There were no part-timers when the city operated the facilities 10 years ago.

"Having to use city employees is going to be a nightmare for Seattle," Cooke said. "Maintenance costs make up at least 60 percent of a course budget. That means Seattle's non-profit company is controlling a minority of its own operational budget. If they fail, it will be because of that, not because the advisory board or the company didn't do their jobs."

Appraised of Seattle's city charter requiring the use of municipal employees on all Seattle golf course facilities, Cooke responded: "Charters are made by people and can be changed by people. Congress has amended the U.S. Constitution, so a city ought to be able to amend its own charter.

"We've been successful because we were able to eliminate politics from business decisions. Indianapolis Mayor Stephen Goldsmith asked me what was the single most important thing he could do in order to make this work in his city. Politicians must want to see a non-profit firm succeed and then be willing to get out of the way."

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