

FEATURE I

John Ekstrom, Hinsdale Golf Club



A Trip to Washington D.C.

Before I begin, I have to thank the MAGCS and Mr. Bob Maibusch. Bob has allowed me to be involved in MAGCS and GCSAA throughout my tenure as his assistant. I want to publicly thank him for his support of my involvement. The MAGCS deserves many thanks as well. Luke Cella and past Boards promoted the Class C position and fostered its growth. Being the Class C Advisor from 2006-07 helped springboard me to opportunities as a writer on the national scene and to being known in Lawrence. So for that, I cannot thank the MAGCS enough.

It was a privilege and an honor to help represent our industry as a part of the GCSAA contingent that attended National Golf Day in Washington, D.C., on April 13, 2011. I arrived two days earlier, as part of the GCSAA Government Relations Committee. This group was chaired by Pat Finlen, CGCS, and John O'Keefe, CGCS. Chava McKeel, Senior Director of Information and Public Policy, was the staff liaison for our committee. Chava is an amazing resource. If you ever have any issues or questions, DO NOT hesitate to call her. She has connections in Washington and is usually aware of pressing issues at the state level as well.

On the first day, we met at Reed Smith, a law firm that helps GCSAA stay abreast of issues on the Hill. What most interested me was hearing the concerns of the other committee members. Our group included nine Superintendents and one Assistant. The states represented were: Oregon, California, Colorado, New York, New Jersey, Ohio, Maryland, and Illinois. Each member of the group explained some of the issues they face in their respective states. The issues that we have had faced in Illinois over the past ten years are small compared to some of theirs. I was one of the last to speak. I explained that even though Illinois has the third largest city in the U.S., there is quite a bit of agriculture south of I-80 and west of Aurora. I am guessing that helps golf, most of the time.

There are two major issues that most states are facing: either water restrictions or the loss of fungicides in their arsenal. Every year, the pesticide label lists a new state in which it cannot be used. My question is: when will Illinois be added to the knock list?



Bob Ehler, CGCS, MG from Long Island, New York, told the group that there are three aquifers running underneath Long Island. Environmentalists are so tapped in with the legislators and the state EPA that when annual testing is done on the water quality, if any pesticide can be detected at the level of parts per billion, they recommend it be removed from usage in New York. Yes, I said parts per billion; that technology is now available. To me, that is like one drop of water in an Olympic sized swimming pool. Scary stuff.

Later on that day, we heard from Mr. Michael O'Brien from Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment (RISE). Mike is the replacement for Allen James who some of you may recall visited Chicago a few years ago at the turf clinic. Mike told an even scarier story. In the Pacific Northwest a group called the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) has sued the EPA. They are using the Endangered Species Act to make the EPA look at the impact of 300 different pesticides on 214 endangered species across the country. The scariest thing about this, from what Mike said, is that this group, Center for Biological Diversity, could turn this into a mega lawsuit, which could affect every state and county nationwide. The fallout would be that the EPA and federal government, not having time and funding (mainly funding) to pursue all of these court cases, would settle. In settling with the CBD, I can guarantee that some pesticides would be removed from the market in the U.S. Pretty scary stuff if you ask me.

After the meeting concluded, we walked about eight blocks, going past the White House and the U.S. Treasury

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en route to the hotel. On our walk, just next to the hotel we saw a large, gated home with a guard in front. There were security cameras and a foreign flag out front. Upon entering the hotel, I asked the bellman who lives next door, "Oh that, that's just the Russian ambassador."

Later that evening, we went to the Republican Capital Hill Club for dinner. Many of golf's dignitaries were in attendance. CEOs from all of the major golf organizations were present, along with a contingent of members and staff from each organization. By coincidence, I had the opportunity to sit next to Steve Mona, CEO of the World Golf Foundation and former GCSAA CEO. I had met Steve briefly, once before, but it was nice to speak with him again. The GCSAA group was well represented. Several people told me that the Speaker of the House, John Boehner, was in the building with his security detail having dinner. Unfortunately I did not get to see him. Following a great meal, there were several presentations about what to expect in our Hill visits the next day. David Marin, of The Podesta Group, concluded the evening by giving a sort of pep talk to our group before we left.

After breakfast on April 13th, we all took taxis to the Rayburn Building in the Capital Hill complex. The "We Are Golf" exhibit was there and was already seeing quite a bit of traffic. The PGA had a swing simulator and an indoor virtual golf game in the second floor foyer. Along with that, there were two putting greens. The two greens were the Democrat/Republican challenge. I never did find out who won, but the right was leading before I left. This was an opportunity for legislators, their staff, and anyone walking by to be educated about Golf. My day included four appointments. I had meetings at the offices of Congressman Adam Kinzinger, Congresswoman Judy Biggert, Senator Dick Durbin, and Senator Mark Kirk, all from Illinois, of course. I didn't know what to expect, but Chava McKeel from GCSAA attended my first appointment. We met with the Congressman's legislative aide for economic policy. In our meeting, we explained some of the economic value golf brings to the United States and educated him on some recent legislation that excluded golf.

Here are a few of the highlights:

- Golf is misperceived as solely a rich, white man's game.
- 75% of golf in the U.S. is public
- Golf is a \$75 billion a year industry
- Golf employs over 2 million people in the U.S.
- In Illinois, there are 678 golf courses
- Over \$2 billion dollars are generated for the Illinois economy because of golf
- The IRS considers golf courses to be small businesses, employing people who rely on the game for housing, food, and sustainability.
- In the aftermath of recent natural disasters, Hurricane Katrina/Floods in Iowa, golf was excluded from those disaster relief bills.
- Golf was included with Tattoo/Massage parlors, liquor stores, and gambling establishments, entities not able to get federal disaster relief.

We shared this information with each of the Congressional and Senate staffs we met, and they were amazed.

Following our ten-minute meeting with Congressman Kinzinger's office, Chava and I parted ways so she could make

some phone calls. I made my way to Congresswoman Judy Biggert's office, where I met with her aide for Economic Policy. Sharing some of the same ideas as I had before, this lobbying thing didn't seem too hard. That was put in perspective after my second meeting. I was heading to lunch when I met a lobbyist waiting in line in the cafeteria. He noticed the WE ARE GOLF button on my coat. He asked about our campaign, and then said, "Well at least you aren't some bloodsucker, like me, who represents the banking industry. Everyone likes golf." I can see that his job, especially in these times, is not the easiest.

In the cafeteria, I met a few committee members for lunch. While there I saw some of the PGA contingent and started talking with one gentleman. He asked me how my day was going. I mentioned that I had already met with two legislators and had two more visits to go. Astonished, he asked, "How did you guys set up all of the appointments with the legislators?" I told him that GCSAA works with Reed Smith and that they helped us coordinate all of this. This meant that GCSAA had more individual meetings than any other allied golf organization. That made me feel good.

Also, at lunch in the Rayburn cafeteria, I saw a two-star Air Force General. I had never seen that before. Pretty cool stuff.

The afternoon sessions with Senator Durbin and Senator Kirk's staffs went well. Chava met me to go to Senator Durbin's office as back up. She is very well versed on H.R. 872 – the NPDES permitting bill that would amend the Clean Water Act and FIFRA. It negates the need for the NPDES permits and allows pesticide labels to be overseen by FIFRA and the Clean Water Act. Hence, H.R. 872 is important. That's the message we shared, that and the economic benefits of golf described earlier. The House voted and passed H.R.872 with a bipartisan majority on March 31. Now it will go to the Senate for a vote. Being that Senator Durbin is the #2 man (Whip) in the Senate, behind Senator Harry Reid, I felt having Chava come along was very important. We had a good exchange with Senator Durbin's aide. He was aware of the legislation, but said the Senator hadn't made up his mind on the issue. I hope we helped sway his thinking.

Lastly, Chava left for another meeting and I went to Senator Kirk's office alone. I met with his aide on economic policy and discussed all of the same items that were covered in Senator Durbin's office. These meetings lasted about 10-15 minutes, each.

For me, this was a once in a lifetime event. I flew back to Chicago that evening. After an uneventful flight, which is always good, I lost my iPod on the plane. Aside from being upset about the iPod, I had a wonderful trip. Not only is it always good to spend time with the Board members and staff of GCSAA, but I got to talk with golf's leaders and hear their stories, worries, and hopes. I know it sounds corny but we are all a part of golf. The Family of Golf. If the golf economy is down, it affects all of us. Club managers, pros, the hot dog guy, people selling drivers at Golf Galaxy; all of us. It was great to be part of National Golf Day, especially as an assistant superintendent. An experience I will never forget.

Thank you MAGCS. **-OC**