

The Place of Municipal Golf In the City Recreation Plan

A Paper by George Hjelte, General Manager, Department
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Recreation has come to be an accepted function of local government. It is, to be sure, a comparatively new function. Within the memory of most of us, cities gave no attention whatsoever to the establishment of publicly owned recreation facilities for their citizens, with the exception, however, that parks have had a place in city planning and operations for ages. Parks, however, were justified primarily from the standpoint of city beautification and until modern times were not developed with the view to their use for active recreation.

It is now considered good practice and an imperative necessity that cities plan public facilities for recreation. It is not the accepted viewpoint, however, that all recreation is a proper sphere for local governmental enterprise. Recreation by and large continues to be as it properly should remain, the prerogative of the individual in his private capacity. Under our democratic way of life the American people would resent any intrusion on the part of government upon their right to make choices of recreation for their own enjoyment and benefit. Nevertheless they recognize that in some respects recreation properly becomes a concern of government and especially in respect to the setting aside and the improvement of land wherein the people may pursue the conventional American outdoor sports and pastimes with the minimum of regimentation and with no dictation whatsoever upon the part of government insofar as the choices of recreation are concerned.

Local government in setting aside and improving places of recreation must refrain from competing with private enterprise. Public facilities for recreation are usually established only when there is no other way of providing them. If the provision of children's playgrounds were left wholly to the initiative of individual citi-

zens in their private capacity, there would be relatively few playgrounds and most of the children in the congested cities would be denied the right to participate in wholesome play activities in an attractive and safe environment. Accordingly, public



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opinion gives support to the solution of the playground problem by assigning the responsibility for the establishment of playgrounds to the municipality or in some cases to the public school organizations.

Similarly, cities would be without regional parks if their establishment and operation were left wholly to private enterprise. Private enterprise enters into projects only when they are financially profitable. By and large, playgrounds, beaches, swimming pools, and regional parks (golf courses essentially are found in regional parks) do not lend themselves to commercial development and management for profit. Accordingly, it is the accepted viewpoint of the American public that these facilities, necessary as they are, must be accomplished through public provision, namely,

through the method of public taxation for their improvement and support.

Whatever public recreation systems exist in American cities as of today are the result largely of accidental and expedient growth rather than of constructive scientific planning. The city planning movement is, like the recreation movement, comparatively new in municipal practice. The evidences of poor and inadequate planning, however, are everywhere apparent, and the more enlightened cities are making valiant efforts to plan their future growth and development according to the sound principles of city planning which have recently been developed.

In respect to local neighborhood public recreation facilities, the application of these principles is comparatively simple. Everybody knows that the streets, being no longer suitable for the play of children, there must of necessity be a public playground for children in every neighborhood. Inasmuch as the American youth are given to practice and participation in the conventional American sports of baseball, tennis, football, and the like, it is an accepted principle of city planning that district playgrounds of, say, 10 to 20 acres, must be located in every district, a district being understood to be an area of several residential neighborhoods. With these basic principles in mind, under city planning laws a city may govern its future development and as funds are provided by bond issues and otherwise, the necessary local and district play facilities can be provided.

Golf, however, presents a peculiar problem in that necessarily a golf course requires area so large that a golf course must be located in regional areas, usually on the periphery of a large and growing city. Few cities have been able to acquire and develop a municipal golf course on the basis of predetermined long range plans. In almost every case public golf courses are established where by some accidental circumstance an area suitable for golf within or close to a city has remained unsubdivided, or within a large regional park acquired often as necessary water shed land, or as the gift of some public benefactor.

At this point one might well ask why golf should be a particular concern of municipal government and why the establishment of municipal golf courses should be favored at all. It is well known that most of the golf courses in the United States are owned by private clubs and that

a considerable number are so-called public courses under private ownership whose clientele is not necessarily exclusive; that is to say, the courses are open to public play at an established fee. Certainly no one would advocate that all golf courses be governmentally owned and yet no one seems to object to municipal golf courses as they are now operated on a fee charging basis, and municipal courses exist in the same community in which privately operated public courses and exclusive club courses likewise exist.

Golf has tended to become a public enterprise usually because of the accidental circumstance that suitable land for golf was available in a regional park. Most of these regional parks have been acquired through private benefaction. There was ample reason for their acceptance. For example, the necessity of preserving a water shed and water storage area, the desirability of forest and wild life preservation, the importance of maintaining large open areas to relieve the oppressive congestion of metropolitan cities, the necessity for the prevention of conflagrations, and the popular desire for outdoor recreations other than golf and especially those related to hiking, picnicking, and the enjoyment of nature.

Since it was necessary from any or all of these standpoints to maintain an area once accepted as a regional park it appeared to be just as reasonable and even more beneficial to improve the area by maintaining it in beautiful turf and thus to make it available for the increasingly popular pastime of golf.

The added expense of ground maintenance when used for golf, as well as the limited clientele directly served by golf no doubt was the compelling reason why golf was placed largely upon a self-sustaining basis through the charging of more than ordinarily large daily fees. No other public recreation facility is operated on the principle that the users pay for the day-to-day enjoyment of the facility and at a rate so high as is customarily charged for golf.

By and large, municipal golf courses are financially self-supporting and in fact many of them produce an excess of revenue over expenses. This enables other courses to be added once a single course has been placed in successful operation. The Los Angeles situation in this regard is noteworthy.

The first municipal golf course in Los Angeles was a 9-hole sand course in Grif-

fifth Park and was opened in 1914. Excess of revenue over expense in the operation of this course permitted the construction of the first grass course, and similar profits throughout the years have financed almost entirely the system of seven golf courses, all with well planted and well maintained fairways and excellent greens. All of these courses but two have been established on lands which were not necessarily acquired for golf but the accumulated surplus was sufficient to permit of an investment of \$250,000 for 184 acres upon which a 9-hole pitch-and-putt course has already been constructed and upon which a most modern 18-hole course is soon to open.

The ability of municipal courses to support themselves is no doubt due in large measure to the fact that the activity rarely has to bear the original cost of the land and is relieved of the burden of taxes as well as interest on the investment. In these respects municipally owned golf courses have tremendous advantage over privately owned golf courses.

There were, in 1941, 711 municipal golf courses operated by cities and counties throughout the United States, according to Herb Graffis, Editor of "Golfdom," who has compiled statistics meticulously on golf in all of its phases. A few of these courses were discontinued during World War II but a number of courses have been added since the termination of the War, as in the case of Los Angeles, which has constructed 3 new courses since that time.

According to statistics published by the National Recreation Association, the number of municipal courses did not increase during the past decade; in fact, the number of courses reported in 1946 was 14 less than the number reported in 1938. In the 12-year period previous to 1938, namely, from 1926 to 1938, the number of municipal golf courses reported to the National Recreation Association increased 82 per cent. This growth kept pace with the increase generally in the number of municipal recreation facilities during the period of prosperity following World War I and throughout the world-wide depression.

The period of prosperity was conducive to the acquisition of new lands, an essential prerequisite to the provision of municipal golf facilities, and the plentiful supply of work relief throughout the years of depression was conducive to their development as municipal golf courses.

It is a fact to be pondered, however, that the number of municipal courses has

shown no noticeable increase during the past decade. This can be attributed to several factors. The first of these is that by 1940 municipal park land suitable for the development of golf courses had been pretty well developed largely with the use of relief labor. The second reason is that after 1940 the nation became preoccupied with war production, and little labor was available for the development of golf courses. After World War II labor and materials were both scarce and costly, which conditions gave no incentive for the development of public golf lands.

The stagnate tendency in municipal golf development is somewhat paralleled by a similar condition with respect to privately owned golf courses. The same conditions and an important added factor have resulted in a decrease in the number of private courses generally throughout the nation in the past decade. For example, in the Los Angeles metropolitan area extending from Orange on the south to Ventura on the north, and from the ocean to Riverside on the east, the number of private courses is 17 less than in 1930. The added factor is the increased value of large land holdings in metropolitan areas and the larger return that may be had from such land holdings by subdividing them for home building as against maintaining them in turf and operating them as golf courses. During the war with less play and more costly operations, and in fact during the depression, private golf clubs experienced a difficult period, many being forced to discontinue operations, and when a favorable real estate market occurred their lands were turned to other uses, notably, subdivision for home building.

Generally, the same conditions which render a piece of land suitable for golf development in suburban regions likewise render the same land highly valuable for suburban residential subdivision, being of slightly and interesting terrain and convenient to large population by means of highways or rapid transit.

How many municipal golf courses should a city of considerable size plan to own and operate? I speak of cities, of course, because my subject has to do with the planning of cities. However, rural areas can well be eliminated from our consideration for an obvious reason, namely, that a publicly owned golf course presupposes a considerable population to justify its existence,

and wherever you have a concentration of sufficient population to support golf courses you have inevitably a city. It has been estimated that a municipal golf course may, in the course of a year, serve a clientele of, roughly, 2500 persons, some of whom will choose to play golf regularly; possibly a third are regular golfers who play two or more times weekly, and many others who play infrequently, once a week, once a month, or so. With the many other recreation activities competing with golf for public attention, only a fraction of the population can be expected to be interested in pursuing the game of golf. Some of these will choose to play under private club auspices. Apparently, therefore, it would require a considerable population in a city, say, 10,000 or 15,000, before a municipal golf course could be entirely justified from the standpoint of cost and ability to largely maintain itself.

We might consider, therefore, the question of how many golf courses a city should have from the standpoint of cities exceeding 20,000 in population, of which there were in 1948, 1071. Since numerous cities have more than one course, a few as many as 4 to 7, and many with 2 and 3, it is a fact that more than half of the cities of over 20,000 population in the United States today have no municipal course.

Presently there is no satisfactory basis upon which to determine a reasonable standard of provision for municipal golf. No city of any considerable size has yet sufficient municipal golf courses to say that the public need has been satisfied, and with increased leisure and inevitable expectation as a result of improved technology, it can be expected that interest in the playing of golf will increase rather than decrease in the future.

Los Angeles, which has 7 municipal golf courses, one to be completed soon and placed in operation, and additional municipal courses maintained by a few of the satellite cities and the county, is convinced that if the number of courses were doubled there still would not be sufficient to take care of the present demand. For example, on a fair Sunday as many as 300 to 400 people are turned away from the municipal golf courses because of their inadequacy, and this condition being well known, numerous persons refrain altogether from taking up golf and pursuing it as a regular recreation because of insufficiency of municipal facilities or privately operated public golf courses at which the playing privilege

may be enjoyed at comparatively nominal expense.

Accordingly, one would say, in answer to the question, How many courses should a municipality have, it should have as many as possible for there is no likelihood of any municipality being able to outdo itself in the matter of providing adequately for this most valuable recreational activity.

Thus it will be seen that golf occupies a unique place in the planning of municipal recreation facilities in modern cities. If golf is to become a pastime and sport available to large numbers of urban dwellers, it must inevitably be accepted as an object for city planning, and golf courses must increasingly be provided through governmental action. Private courses will of course continue to cater to those who can afford the high cost of golf when exclusive playing privileges and superior accommodations are provided. These courses, however, must be supplemented by public courses whose development in regional parks may continue to be justified not only because the players may continue to pay for the playing privilege and in proportion as they use the courses, but also due to their value in landscape adornment, in the relief of urban congestion, and in their value in fire prevention. All of these conditions and values taken together amply justify a progressive policy on the part of American cities in the acquisition of regional park lands for many uses, including the playing of golf.

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Officials of Northeastern Wisconsin golf clubs held their annual spring conference at Butte des Morts GC, Appleton, May 3 and re-elected M. A. Carroll, Oshkosh, pres., Dan Steinberg, Jr., Butte des Morts, sec'y-treas., and Frank Cornelison, Oneida Riding & GC, Green Bay, dir. at large. (L to R) Carroll, Frank Boex, Oneida, Heber Pelkey, Butte des Morts, Cornelison, and Steinberg.