"There are more signs each day that point to the fact that cities may want to consider getting out of the golf course management/ operation business."

MARK WOODWARD, *Contributing Editor*

May be time for a change

I was at a golf conference a few weeks ago and I heard something that I never really had put a lot of thought into. But once I heard it, it made perfect sense. One of the speakers reminded the audience that the largest group of golf course owners in the United States is municipalities. I think he mentioned that there are over 2,000 municipally or government-owned golf courses in our country. This number is significantly larger than any other one specific ownership group.

If you really think about this it's true. There are cities all across the United States who own and manage at least one golf course and also a number of larger cities that own and manage up to as many as eight golf courses and possibly more.

Although the topic of this speaker's session was not specifically about municipal golf, this one statement rang a bell with me because I've spent the majority of my career in this sector of the golf industry.

The phenomenon of municipalities owning golf courses is not surprising. Cities feel an obligation to provide their residents with lifestyle amenities that enhance the livability of a particular city. Golf and recreational opportunities in general can and do play a significant role in this concept.

One of the problems is that a large segment of the population may take part in a wide array of recreational and cultural activities within their communities, but in most locations only about 10 percent (+/-) of the people play golf. This statistic alone puts golf in a precarious situation when it comes to community support and most importantly, funding. This problem drastically affects all the other types of golf courses as well (private, daily fee, resort, etc.) but that's for another column.

In many cases it may make good sense for municipalities to own golf courses because they do play a significant role in a community's assets and amenities. But there are more signs each day that point to the fact that cities may want to consider getting out of the golf course management/operation business.

There are many reasons for this, but first and foremost, in today's economy it is more and more difficult for cities to find the necessary funding to continue to do things the way they did in golf's heyday (in the '80s and '90s). Also, in most cases it is more costly for cities to maintain/manage golf courses simply because of their wage scales and benefits packages.

In the past when golf rounds were up and costs were lower, cities could generally keep up and sustain a golf system that would at least break even and hopefully make a nominal profit. But since most municipalities have struggled drastically the past several years because of the economy, many have come to the conclusion that they need to operate differently.

Now, just like everything, there are exceptions to this rule. There are cities that have highly successful golf operations. But the fact is, many municipalities across our country are struggling with their golf operations.

Politically and for public safety reasons it is more important for cities to use their appropriated funds for things like police, fire, sanitation and other items that we as Americans have come to expect our cities to provide. These items are for the good of the entire community and not just a select group.

I'm not saying every municipality should get out of the golf management business. I'm just suggesting that in light of our economic times and the important issues that cities face with funding, there may be situations where it makes perfect sense to look at the their golf operations differently.

The reason I say this, and this is coming from someone who has been in municipal golf for most of his life, is because I understand the important role that affordable and accessible golf plays in growing our game and creating new golfers. I would hate to see this segment of our industry go away because then rounds and revenues would decline even further than they already have.

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