

Municipal golf links bring 'green' to cities

By Carolyn DeMarco
Staff writer

The purchase of Shenandoah Golf Course by West Bloomfield Parks and Recreation is up in the air. But parks and recreation officials in neighboring communities say a municipal golf course is probably the most profitable recreational land buy the township could make.

"As a recreational activity, there are few that more than cover operating expenses. Golf courses do," said Darrel Middlewood, director of the department of public services for Birmingham.

Before withdrawal from the market by Shenandoah owners, the site was a top priority of parks and recreation. Parks also wants to buy Grand Trunk Railroad right-of-way and the former Howard brothers wooded property. Money for the purchases will come from a 10-year, 15-mill tax approved by voters in November, collectible beginning in December.

Birmingham has two nine-hole municipal courses. In Hills, built by the city in 1965, and Springdale, acquired in the 1920s as a golf course. Middlewood said both are consistently profitable with money from greens fees, cart rentals and concessions.

"Last year we returned \$20,000 to the general fund from a net gain of almost \$68,000," Middlewood said.

Nearly 65,000 rounds of golf were played at the combined courses last year, the highest in the recent past.

"Some years have been higher, but not since the early '70s," he added.

THE COURSES are basically for residents only, with several hundred businesses offered up to five memberships each, bringing in \$16,000. Additionally, 300 limited non-residents pay a \$225 annual fee.

Greens fees are \$4.50 weekdays, \$5 weekends for nine holes for members. Guests pay \$6.50 weekdays, \$7 weekends.

On the down side, Middlewood said, "You have to consider what 125 acres of subdivided property would pay in taxes if homes were built there."

Southfield's golf courses are not looked at in terms of profitability, said Bill Walenczak, parks and recreation director.

"We charge below-average fees and carry year-round employees who work on other projects but are paid through the golf course budget. Even so, we generally break even, and we could make a profit."

Walenczak said he would not hesitate recommending golf course to parks departments. "If you run it like a business it could produce revenues for other department programs."

Walenczak estimates that 70,000 rounds were played last year at the two nine-hole courses — Evergreen Hills, opened in 1971, and Beech Woods, opened in 1974.

Greens fees are \$5.25 per nine on weekdays, \$6.50 weekends for residents. Non-residents are welcome but must pay an additional \$3. Revenues come from greens fees, cart rentals and concessions plus a \$15 annual card, which allows players to reserve a tee time.

TROY PARKS and recreation department bought Sylvan Glen in 1970 and is still paying for it, according to parks and rec director Roger Kowalski.

"It covers its cost. We think it should support itself and it does, although it still owes the city money. It pays the debt and operating costs."

When the debt is paid off, he added, it will become a money-maker. Last year Sylvan Glen records

People flock to courses

showed 62,000 starts on a nine-hole basis at the 18-hole course. Weekday greens fees are \$6.25 for nine holes, \$9 for 18 holes for residents. Non-residents are welcome but pay more. Cross country skiing is offered in the winter.

Farmington Hills' department of special services contracts with a golf pro to run its nine-hole San Marino course. The course was bought in 1979 and won't turn a profit until 1990 when the debt will be retired, said Eric Wurminger, assistant director of special services.

"In terms of operating costs it makes money. It's very profitable," he said. Resident greens fees are \$5.75 weekdays. Non-residents pay \$7.

Whether other communities would be equally successful, Wurminger said, depends on the condition of the course they purchase.

"When we purchased San Marino it needed a lot of repairs. A lot of maintenance money was put into it."

A sprinkling system, clubhouse refurbishing and redoing greens have all required capital outlay.

ALTHOUGH GLEN Oaks, an 18-hole course in Farmington Hills, was bought for public use by the Oakland County Parks and Recreation Department, at nearly the same time, Wurminger believes as public courses go, the area is nowhere near saturation.

"It was estimated we could handle a maximum of 41,000 rounds annually. We operate 45,000, and we're pretty much booked. There's room for more, absolutely, no question."

Ralph A. Richard, manager of Oakland County Parks and Recreation, agrees.

The commission operates three 18-hole courses and one nine-hole course in Oakland County, including Glen Oaks, its best revenue-producer.

"The population is there. The golfers are there," he said. "Oakland County is the biggest (golf course) user place in the country."

Last year, with 85,000 rounds of golf, Glen Oaks was the most used of the county's courses. The 1987 budget for Glen Oaks projects revenues of \$572,500, with the greatest portion from greens fees. (Weekday fees for nine holes are \$5.75 for residents.)

Other revenues come from golf cart rentals, banquet rental and food and the pro shop. Operating costs are listed at \$423,350 for an expected profit of \$149,150.

Glen Oaks' financial position was enhanced two years ago, Richards said, when 10 of the acres off Northwestern Highway were sold to a developer for \$2.3 million, nearly the same price paid for the entire 148-acre course in 1976.

IF RUN efficiently, Richard said, a municipal golf course can be a

great asset for a parks and recreation department and a community.

"It gives you a well-rounded city with all the amenities residents want, and you're preserving green space. If it goes as multiple, you lose that green space."

Establishing a profit-making course, however, takes time, he said.

"It will take a couple of years. You have to weed out whether you want residents only or non-residents as well. You have to look at leagues; there has to be a good mix there, and it takes awhile. You have to look at what can be charged in greens fees, how you're going to market it."

Having a full-service facility with a building will allow for expanded programming, especially for youths and seniors, he added, as well as space for administrative functions.

The key to a successful program, Richard said, is a capable staff and a solid philosophy.

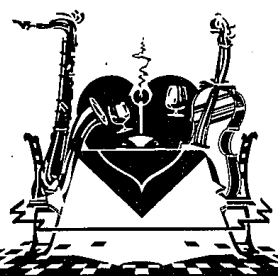
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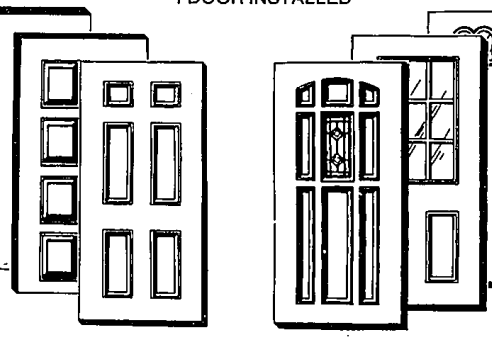
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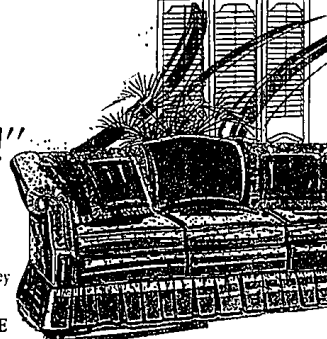
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