

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: City shouldn't steal from its golf courses

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Golfers at Monona Golf Course feel under siege. That's because Madison Mayor Paul Soglin and other city leaders are talking about selling the beautiful nine-hole course, operated by the city of Madison, for development.

Imagine seeing condos on the fifth fairway? Let's hope not. Yes, the city golf courses have run deficits eight of the last nine years. But wait a minute. The Monona Terrace runs deficits of millions of dollars a year and nobody talks about selling the convention center.

But golf is supposed to be self-supporting. It doesn't get subsidized by the city room tax, like Monona Terrace. The biggest golf budget deficit so far was \$393,000 last year -- even though revenues reached a record high \$3.2 million.

Madison Parks Superintendent Eric Knepp says it is due to the cost of depreciating course facilities and equipment. If a big mower costs \$50,000, that value depreciates at roughly \$5,000 a year over 10 years. Eventually, this cost mounts. A big driver of costs has been the horrible drainage at Yahara Hills Golf Course on Madison's Southeast Side. Knepp says more than \$225,000 has been lost over the last two years due to closing the course and cancelling outings due to flooding. And workers still have to get paid to pump out the bunkers and care for the greens.

Madison's Golf Advisory Committee is asking the city for up to \$8.6 million to maintain and repair the courses and to renovate outdated clubhouses. The Clubhouse at Odana Hills Golf Course on the West Side was built in 1957. It still has Plexiglass windows, and the boiler can cost up to \$20,000 a year.

But Mayor Soglin says the golf courses need to be self-supporting, and that selling Monona Golf Course makes the most sense.

No it doesn't.

Older adults with time to play adore the course. And Monona is home to the First Tee Program of South Central Wisconsin. About 170 youngsters took part in the junior golf program this year at Monona alone. First Tee serves almost 350 junior golfers at all four Madison public courses.

"Monona Golf Course is far and away the best suited course for our kids," says First Tee Executive Director Joe Loehnis. Former First Tee Director and Golf Advisory Committee member Joni Dye suggests the city sell a lesser used park.

After all, the golf courses are parks. They provide recreational opportunities for golfers of all skill levels at lower prices than the for-profit competitors. And the city *takes* money from the golf enterprise every year and spends that money on non-golf expenses. In 2016, the city grabbed \$239,164 from the golf enterprise. The city also takes money from the Community Development Authority, Parking Utility, Water Utility and Monona Terrace.

But there is a difference. Those operations are either subsidized, or they are monopolies. Golf is neither. Plus, the golf enterprise has to farm out its 25 to 35 bigger service vehicles to the city for maintenance and repair. That cost \$260,000 last year for the fleet. That is up from \$190,000 in 2015.

Golf also had to pay \$71,000 for unemployment insurance, and \$49,000 in matching employee pension contributions. Remember, golf has to be self-supporting. But why isn't Monona Terrace self-supporting? Why does the city have a capital budget and an operating budget, yet golf doesn't? It just has one budget.

If the city builds a new parking ramp, it will borrow money and pay back the principle and interest over years. Golf isn't allowed to do that. It could certainly afford to do it out of cash revenue and pay interest on long-term projects.

I'm avoiding delving into the lawsuit by the former golf pros against the city. Some of them are friends of mine, and I'm sure they would have a lot to say after being dumped in 2012. I wish them well, but the issues raised here go beyond whoever runs the clubhouses or the carts. And for those who think all of the problems are because the city demands that the 30 to 35 seasonal golf employees have to be paid a living wage, I don't think so. Parks Superintendent Knepp estimates the additional cost is about \$70,000 a year. That would be like blaming the federal budget deficit on public television.

So give golf a capital budget. Fix the drainage at Yahara. Renovate the clubhouses, and have wedding receptions and other social events there. Stop stealing money from the golf fund. Let the wonderful First Tee program grow. If Madison wants to close its Monona Golf Course and spend millions for a city market that few people can walk to, maybe the city should think again.

The late Chicago disc jockey Larry Lujack said, "They are killing each other all over the world and in our major cities, and the only thing that makes any sense is golf." Old "Uncle Lar" was right.

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