

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: Don't Close Madison Golf Courses

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It is time to stop.

That is, Madison leaders should stop talking about closing city-owned golf courses, such as Yahara Hills on the East Side, or the jewel of a nine-hole course on Monona Drive.

Madison Mayor Paul Soglin wants city-owned golf courses to be self-supporting, and they've run deficits eight of the last nine years. The gap is covered by the city's reserve fund, and the golf enterprise pays it back.

But here's the point: Golf is supposed to pay for long-term capital expenses with cash coming in for operations. That is not fair. If golf had a separate capital budget like the city has, it would be able to cover the financing without costing the taxpayers a dime.

Members of the city's golf subcommittee last week said they would rather close holes at Yahara than sell the Monona course.

But Parks Superintendent Eric Knepp says any such attempt to save money by cutting operating expenses doesn't address the long term capital needs. He estimates that need is between \$5.9 million and \$8.6 million, with \$4 million needed for the swampy Yahara alone.

Subcommittee Chairman Dan Smith says, "You could drop a hand grenade in Olbrich Park at certain times of the day and not affect anybody. Does that mean we close the park?"

He goes on, "Let's say the bike paths start to crumble, do we close them?"

Smith is right that parks are what make a city great. Low-income junior golfers, including youngsters of color, get their first chance to play golf primarily at the Monona course through the First Tee program. Seniors also love to play there and at the other city-owned courses.

Later this month an outside consultant will present the Parks Department a market analysis of city golf going forward. Then in January the parks staff will present those ideas and their own recommendations to the Parks Commission and golf subcommittee.

Parks Superintendent Knepp says the goal is to operate all 72 holes in 2018. Beyond that, a plan is needed to stay out of the red. If the city wants to be in the golf business, it must separate operating expenses from longer-term capital costs. Short of that, Smith says course improvements don't have to be done overnight. The weather dictates that some years are better than others, he notes.

After my latest passionate video on this issue was posted at madison.com on giving the golf enterprise the ability to plan for golf course improvements with its own capital budget, I received plenty of emotional feedback from city golfers.

One email came from golfer and successful artistic project designer Mark Schmitz. He writes: "Thank you from all of us who grew up playing barefoot at Yahara, Glenway, Odana and Monona. I peddled 10-cent lemonade on the 17th tee at Odana and sold Mike Gentilli, his lost balls on #15 back to him for 25 cents from 1968-1978."

Gone now, Gentilli would have smiled at that story. I also met Gentilli, a great character at Odana, and played golf with him and so many other Madison legends at that course over the years.

The same memories are made at the other courses, too. We really don't want to deny younger golf lovers the chance to make their own memories. Surely, city leaders can plan for that to continue.

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