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For many, municipal courses are the lifeblood of golf. But what are the key factors that city administrators need to consider when providing facilities to their communities, and how are ASGCA members helping to deliver value? Toby Ingleton finds out more



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The historic Keller Golf Course in Maplewood, Minnesota reopened in 2014 following an extensive and highly successful renovation by Richard Mandell, ASGCA. Mandell sought the input of local golfers throughout the design process

“There’s a great sense of pride among the community that we have a really good golf course,” says Cliff Keheley, city manager of Mesquite, Texas.

The municipal course holds a special place in golfers’ hearts. For some of us, it may be the one local course that is accessible and affordable, and therefore our only opportunity to enjoy the sport. For others it may be where we first picked up a club. And with city-owned courses regularly featured on pro tour schedules—think Torrey Pines, Bethpage Black and Chambers Bay—they even allow us to walk in the footsteps of our golfing heroes, an opportunity that is rare in any other sport.

Throughout the United States—which, like the UK and Canada, is one of only a few countries where municipal golf is widespread—local governments face common challenges when providing golf facilities to their community.

In the case of Mesquite, the city sought the help of Jeff Brauer, ASGCA Past President, to deliver a renovation with an emphasis on value. “We have a large number of senior golfers,

it was important to maintain an affordable green fee,” says Keheley.

The initial goal was to rebuild greens and tee boxes. “But with Jeff’s help, we were really able to maximize the budget—we even relocated several greens to add length, and redesigned three complete holes which really changed the character of the course. We got much more than we expected.”

Keheley explains that upon completion, play increased dramatically, surpassing their goals for numbers of rounds and attracting a lot of new golfers to the course.

“The key to success with this project was the relationship with Jeff and the contractors,” says Keheley. “We worked together and were committed to the same goal.”

A sound investment

It is accepted that many recreational activities provided by local governments—like basketball courts, fitness centers and trails—will incur a cost. But investments in golf often seem subject to greater scrutiny. As a result, municipalities can go long periods without investing in their courses.

“A typical challenge for municipal projects is that their infrastructure has simply worn out,” says Richard Mandell, ASGCA, who was responsible for the highly acclaimed 2014 renovation of the historic Keller Golf Course in Maplewood, Minnesota.

“Municipalities have put a great deal of emphasis on cutting maintenance costs, and foregoing capital expenditure,” says Kevin Norby, ASGCA, who last year completed renovation projects at Coal Creek Golf Course for the City of Louisville, Colorado, and Elmwood Golf Course for the City of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. “But they find themselves losing golfers due to poor conditions. So often when they are looking for help it’s a case of them saying ‘we have done all we can to cut costs, we are looking for ways to increase revenue.’”

Renovation projects to repair infrastructure can deliver the improved conditions that will not only attract more golfers, and more revenue, but also free up resources to focus on more positive activities. “With new infrastructure the golf club can start managing and maintaining the golf course, rather than constantly fixing



Photos: Jessica Larson

The renovation of Mesquite Golf Course in Mesquite, Texas, prompted a sharp upturn in play

problems,” explains Mandell, who is now working on municipal golf projects at Braemar GC for the City of Edina, Minnesota and Hyannis Golf Course for the Town of Barnstable, Massachusetts.

High specification

While city-owned golf courses can go long periods without investments in their infrastructure, when renovation work does go ahead, the work required is often of a high specification. Garrett Gill, ASGCA, who is currently working on projects for the cities of Fargo, North Dakota and Virginia, Minnesota, explains: “The one thing we have noticed is that while the money for investment does not come round every year, or even every ten or twenty years, when it does, governments ‘build to last’. There are no shortcuts, and work on tees, greens and irrigation tends to be done to a very high specification.”

Gill also observes that while the volume of privately-owned golf projects under way at any given time is closely linked to the underlying performance of the economy, municipal projects seem less affected. This may be due to projects being borne out of the necessity to fix ‘broken’ course elements. Also, the extensive bid process and consultation period—including various government departments and the public—means the time it takes for municipal projects to get off the ground is often longer, and more tied to due process.

“Consideration of aspects like bonding, insurance, and the entire public bid process—which might see you having 70 questions to answer from various contractors—means that municipal projects involve a high degree of coordination work,” adds Norby.

Legislation relating to wages for public work, such as the Davis-Bacon Act, also has an impact. “This can add 25 percent to the cost of the work,” says Mark Mungeam, ASGCA. “So any way we can design features that are less time-consuming to build is a benefit.”

Mungeam works with the City of Boston on their two courses: the George Wright Golf Course and the William J. Devine Golf Course in



Mark Mungeam, ASGCA, works with the City of Boston on their two municipal courses



Franklin Park, part of Frederik Law Olmsted’s chain of Boston parks known as the ‘Emerald Necklace’.

“By 2000, the George Wright course was really run down,” says Mungeam. A Donald Ross design from the 1930’s, it had been through tough times under various management companies. The City resumed control of course operations just over a decade ago and Mungeam participated in the development of a Master Plan to restore and upgrade the course. “Over the past eight years we have overseen numerous projects to restore and upgrade both City courses. George Wright was always considered a good and challenging course. Now it is recognized as a real gem and with William Devine GC (also a Ross design), will be the first public courses to host the prestigious Massachusetts Amateur in 2018.”

Broad appeal

In order to both serve the widest possible cross-section of the community, and maximize revenue generation, a common objective for municipal projects is to ensure the design does not exclude any segment of golfer.

“One of the primary differentiators with municipal golf is the need to appeal to a much wider target market,” says Greg Martin, ASGCA. “But this doesn’t mean dumbing-down the golf course. The design actually needs to be very sophisticated to work for this broader range of players.”

At the Phillips Park municipal course in Aurora, Illinois,

Martin’s long-term Master Plan for the course includes changes that make it more challenging for better players, but with wider fairways and large greens to make it more playable for those with lesser ability. “We reduced the yardage slightly but in tournament play scores haven’t been lower than four-under-par.”

“In this day and age the pendulum has swung away from difficult, narrow setups and it’s going back to fun and enjoyment,” says Mandell. “It can be harder to sell that to the better, low handicap golfers, but it really doesn’t affect them that much—widening fairways from 25 to 40 yards isn’t going to dramatically reduce the course record. But a lot of golfers that would have taken eight or nine shots on a hole are then taking six, which really enhances their enjoyment.”

“My whole philosophy is ‘less is more.’ Hazards should challenge, not penalize, golfers, and we should have strategic options. That translates into width and angles. This works well for municipalities because it promotes all-inclusiveness. Golfers of all levels can play these golf courses.”

“At private clubs the average golfer maybe plays more, and is looking for challenge,” says Norby. “Whereas municipal golfers are often shopping for price or value, and may not carry a handicap card. They might often shoot more than 100, or not even keep score, and perhaps not play more than two or three times a year.”

Photos: Kevin Norby



When Kevin Norby, ASGCA, renovated Coal Creek Golf Course in Louisville, a key aim was to make it more appealing for a wide range of players

// The key is to make it fun

Appealing to this broad demographic sometimes requires a change in perspective. “Golf courses often seem to be judged on the speed of their greens. I’m not saying that’s not important, but so many other things contribute to making a good municipal course,” Norby continued.

“The key is to make it fun. So we pay particular attention to the placement of hazards, slope of greens and how thick the rough is. We include multiple tees and also look to eliminate forced carries. This enables us to marry the desire to deliver fun with the provision of a challenge.”

Norby’s renovation of Coal Creek was instigated by storms that damaged the course, but he took the opportunity to introduce changes that would make it more appealing to a wide range of players. New forward tees were introduced, bunkers were repositioned and hundreds of trees were removed. Norby also moved two holes to improve sightlines.

As well as differentiating Coal Creek from other municipal courses in the area, the work also meant the course was better able to withstand extreme weather. When storms hit the site again in 2015, newly introduced drainage and collection

areas meant that no significant damage was incurred.

Of course, if a municipal course succeeds in its goal to broaden appeal, and attracts more players, it must also be able to withstand high levels of play. “I like to provide wide, unencumbered means of access and egress between paths and tees and greens to better spread wear,” says Mungeam.

Mungeam also prefers softer slopes around bunkers and tees for ease of access and maintenance. “I will often shift or eliminate bunkers and trees to speed play, reduce maintenance and eliminate ‘cattle tracks’ created on the edge of features”.

Multi-function

To attract large numbers, many municipalities are working out ways in which their golf courses can be opened up for other activities.

In Fargo, North Dakota, Gill has been hired by the Park District to redesign El Zagal Golf Course. New city levees reduced the space available from 25 to 22 acres and the primary focus of the work is grading and drainage, so the course can improve flood recovery.

Gill created a series of concept drawings highlighting ‘convertible’ elements. The nine-hole short course could be converted to a driving range with target greens in the spring when the course was flooded by the Red River. This type of innovative thinking was key to securing the project. “We

have found municipal courses to be very receptive to suggestions that would enable them to become multi-functional facilities,” says Gill.

The new course will be among the first (if not *the* first) in the U.S. to be specifically designed for footgolf. The concept originally presented to the Park District included integration of traditional golf, footgolf and disc golf. Gill believes golf facilities need to embrace these types of alternative ideas to attract customers. “It enables multi-generational and multi-use enjoyment—you could have a group going out and playing three different forms of golf, all together”.

There is often scope to incorporate completely different recreational activities, such as fishing ponds, lawn bowling, bocce ball courts, and trails for walkers, joggers and cyclists.

And the green outlook provided by hospitality facilities at golf courses can be a unique selling point, particularly for large functions such as weddings and conferences. These can deliver revenue and also raise awareness of what the facility offers to people who might not have otherwise considered visiting.

Green infrastructure

There are additional benefits that can justify municipal golf operations. One obvious example is the preservation of green space. “In many parts of large cities, like New York, New Orleans and Minneapolis, if it wasn’t for municipal



Garrett-Gill, ASGCA, designed El Zagal Golf Course in Fargo, North Dakota with a series of 'convertible' elements



golf courses, there wouldn't be much green space left," says Gill. "This really increases their popularity and the enthusiasm of the local population." Gill worked with PGA Tour player Kelly Gibson to rebuild Joseph M. Bartholomew Municipal Golf Course after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. This was a tremendous commitment by the City of New Orleans to preserve green space and attract residents to return to the city. "One of the beauties of golf is it can be shaped and shifted. It's malleable, you can push and pull it much more than other types of development," says Martin.

This flexibility allows many municipal golf projects to deliver an important role beyond golf, such as water management or a green space buffer to important environmental areas. "All golf could and should be part of a green infrastructure," continues Martin. "We can devise ways to make sure the wider community—including non-golfers—benefit from the value of the asset. You could think of a golf course as a civil engineering project that also delivers an ongoing revenue stream." Martin's recent renovation of the golf course at Wilmette Golf Club on Chicago's North Shore improved the

golf experience while also addressing stormwater management, wetland mitigation and water quality issues.

He is now working on a project that will deliver a host of environmental benefits—at Oak Meadows Golf Preserve in Addison, Illinois, which is owned by the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County.

Work on the Salt Creek that runs through the site will provide over 10 million gallons of floodwater storage, benefiting residents both up and downstream. 33 acres of wetlands will be added and 67 acres of habitat restored. And improvements in water quality will improve biological diversity.

"Oak Meadows will accommodate the public as a preserve as well as a golf course that will allow the game to be played while carefully revealing the environment, its history and charm and restoring its vital landscape function," says Martin.

When municipalities get the formula for their golf course right, the opportunities are endless. ●

The ASGCA has prepared a number of free resources to inform golf course projects, including a Life Cycle Chart to help clubs plan for capital expenditures and foresee disruptions to play caused by unexpected component failure. This and more are available at www.asgca.org/free-publications.



The renovation of Oak Meadows Golf Preserve in Addison, Illinois, will deliver a host of environmental benefits