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Golf column

City Park golf courses plan worth voting for

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A friend of mine once gave me some excellent advice. He said "you can't make everyone happy, though you might try. If you're making everyone happy, there's a good chance you're not doing your job, you haven't taken a stand on anything -- and eventually everyone that you've tried to make happy will be unhappy with you."

I say all that to say this: When the City Park Board of Commissioners votes Tuesday, it should vote to accept the golfing portion of the park's master plan.

The current plan for golf, as part of the City Park Master Plan, was presented to the City Park board on Nov. 27, 2007. At that time, the Bayou District Foundation -- a non-profit organization -- was recognized as a partner in the process.

The organization has retained noted golf course designer Rees Jones and has modeled a master plan for golf and the rebuilding of the St. Bernard housing complex in physical terms and in terms of education. The plan offered to the City Park board is part of that effort.

The organization, if the plan is passed, will submit a bid to run golf in the park, perhaps through a third party.

The plan calls for a \$24 million first phase of construction that could begin by January, with the opening targeted for fall 2011. That would include a championship course, a \$3.3 million clubhouse, an access road to the clubhouse, parking, a driving range and a maintenance building.

The North Course, which reopened in September 2008, would remain open during construction of phase one, but it would close at the outset of phase two, which includes a second 18-hole golf course, a nine-hole executive course with all par-3 holes and a First Tee teaching facility, at a cost of \$21.5 million.

Funding will come from BDF's fundraising -- if the BDF plan is accepted -- and money the park has on hand.

Both sides -- City Park Director Bob Becker and Gerard Barousse Jr., president of BDF -- said there has been no agreement made between the parties. If the plan passes Tuesday, BDF and any other company could bid to redevelop the golf complex.

Certainly, there are some who object to the plan as it is being offered.

"I have lived two blocks from City Park for 16 years and am not in favor of the mega-golf complex as planned by certain powers that be," homeowner Rick Oliver said. "My main problem with 'golfing' such a large area of park real estate is that it immediately becomes inaccessible to non-golfers. If you try to walk your dog or take a hike on a golf course, you will be run off in short order."

Others are worried about whether the golf course will be affordable.

According to the BDF Web site, rates for Course No. 1 are anticipated to range from \$29 twilight to \$75 peak weekend. Rates for Course No. 2 are anticipated to range from \$18 twilight to \$55 peak weekend. Rates for the par-3 course are expected to be approximately \$6 for weekdays and \$9 for weekends.

Are the prices for the first two courses high? Certainly. But are these potential rates out of line with the better courses in the country? Not really.

Still, the perception lingers.

"My only concern is I feel they will always need a price point, like the present North Course, and then maybe an upscale championship course," PGA professional Jimmy Headrick said. "Two courses with the same price point could hurt the total number of rounds. There has always been the golfer in New Orleans who seeks the best value. I am sure you will hear this told often."

I know some would want \$20 fees all the time, but for the kind of course/courses these are supposed to be, the price is not outlandish.

Other questions or objections include:

-- Is the plan feasible?

-- Do we need this?

-- Is the timing right?

In my judgment, the plan has been worked over and worked out until indeed it is feasible.

Is the timing right? Well, that could be debated. No one, including City Park officials and the Bayou District, knows how many rounds of golf will be played.

Melissa Gray, who went to the public forum on the plan in March and is against an affirmative vote, said "golf courses are losing money all over the country. This plan would rely on tourists. The people I've talked to say they could live with one phase being done. That would be acceptable. But two? I wish they could split the vote."

Becker said the vote, at this time, is an up or down one.

If the park courses don't pull in the money it has been suggested they will, who is on the hook for the money?

If the courses are running into financial difficulty, it is my understanding that the one on the hook for the money would be the company, nonprofit or otherwise, who runs the courses.

In talking with Barousse, he said "it is now and has always been our understanding that we would run the golf portion of this."

Hence, the BDF would be the ones accepting the financial difficulty, should it come, at least in the short term, rather than City Park.

Environmentally, they've done the proper studies, I'm told, and the golf courses will be done right.

People who are concerned with how much green space will be used will continue to be concerned. The fact is that the golf courses will be using less acreage than they did before Hurricane Katrina.

And Plan B for the park, if this vote fails, is to redo what already is there.

The bottom line is the lease agreement will be a fair one for both parties, and the park needs the money.

There's going to be a golf-course renovation plan no matter how the vote goes, but this is a better plan than any potential Plan B. This is a better funding possibility than anything that could step forward at this date.

The bottom line: I would I vote yes, and I believe the board will, too.

It's time for the state's plan for the Saints to go forward. It's time for the City Park plan to go forward. It's time for leadership to step forward and rebuild our city.

As crazy as it sounds to some people, sports can help do that, even one errant golf shot at a time.

Send your golf information -- upcoming tournaments, results, holes-in-one and unusual feats -- to bturner@timespicayune.com. Please include full name, witnesses on aces, scores where applicable, and a telephone number or e-mail. Fax information to 985.645.2897 or mail it to On the Links, c/o Billy Turner, The Times-Picayune Sports Department, 2070 Gause Blvd., Slidell, LA. 70461. Tournament scores can be e-mailed and will be published online on nola.com's golf page as well as the rest of the month's scheduled golf tournaments. Deadline for information to be included in Thursday's editions is noon on the Tuesday before publication. Items will be listed space permitting.