

November 2, 2013

To: City of St. Paul Council Members

From: Elaine M. Cownie

Subject: Privatization of Como and Phalen Golf Courses

I attended a meeting at Como golf course on Monday, Oct. 28th, moderated by Susie Odegard with Mike Hahm also in attendance. I was left with more questions than answers.

For the past six months our golfers at Como have been hearing rampant rumors that the City of St. Paul wants to “repurpose” Como golf course in order to build a parking ramp on the south edge of the golf course for the benefit of Como Zoo.

Then, like a bolt out of the blue, comes word that the Parks Dept. is going to issue a “Request for Proposal” to privatize Como and Phalen. The reason for the RFP is that the golf courses are losing money. I am wondering how many other activities are being subsidized by the City and how much money those activities are losing every year. Why is it that the golf courses are expected to make money but not these other activities? The golf program was a cash cow for the City for many years, but now that revenue is in a slump there is a rush to dump them.

There was no talk about a “Plan B” should there not be an acceptable proposal that can be put in place by the end of January 2014. Is the RFP a thinly veiled attempt which, when it fails, will then give the City the excuse it wants to repurpose Como and build the parking ramp?

If there is not an acceptable proposal what will happen next year? Will the City continue to operate the courses at a loss? My personal opinion is that Como will be the sacrificial lamb.

How much money will actually be saved when all of the union employees will be moved to other positions in the Parks & Rec. system?

After hearing comments from the meeting held the following night at Phalen, it is clear that the City favors Phalen over Como. The RFP will contain a recommendation that the Pro and head Greenskeeper at Phalen be retained by the new managing company. This was never mentioned in regard to Como.

It was also mentioned that Phalen is not paying back any of the Highland revenue bonds from the course remodeling. Is Como the only course paying for Highland re-do? All information put forth has been that BOTH courses are contributing to the pay-back of those revenue bonds. What is the truth?

Why hasn't there been more on-line/internet marketing of both courses. It has come to my attention that the computer systems in the Pro Shops are set up to post unused tee times on the internet, but the Parks Dept. will not allow this to happen. Why not? In my humble opinion even a discounted green fee is better than no green fee. The weekend a Groupon offer was made resulted in full tee time bookings. Perhaps the Parks Dept. should hire someone who understands how to market the golf courses. You have to give golfers a reason to play local and not drive 20-30 miles for a "bargain".

I think there is a lot that can be done to make the courses more profitable, but it will take work. All of the activities the City subsidizes add to citizens' (taxpayers') quality of life. That is what should be considered, as well as the "bottom line".

We lived in the Como area (2 blocks from the park) for 27 years in the house my husband grew up in. I can attest to the fact that Como was always the last area the city politicians paid attention to, the last to get services. Now Como is going to take it on the chin again when the golf course is repurposed. Too bad Como doesn't have the clout of the East Side or Highland!

Respectfully,
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