

Town of Westport
Golf Advisory Committee
Minutes

The Golf Advisory Committee of the Town of Westport met in Town Hall in Room 201 on Tuesday, September 4, 2012. The meeting was called to order by Chairman, Fred Hunter, at 7:28 PM.

Members present: Fred Hunter, Mark Holod, Patti Kondub, Jean Murdoch, Joanna Nicholson, Gary Solomon, Scott Smith.

Others Present: Dan Rackliffe (Superintendent of Longshore Golf Course), Reporter from Westport News, Linda Clair (President of LWGA), Michael Erdman (President of LMGA) and approximately 30 members of the public (The largest crowd to attend a GAC meeting in over 6 years).

Chairman Hunter made two announcements before beginning the agenda:

- (1) Patti Kondub has been elected the new president of the LWGA and is resigning from the GAC, as of this evening.
- (2) Stuart McCarthy had informed Mr. Hunter three weeks ago that he could not attend the meeting tonight because of a personal commitment he could not change.
- (3) Several items on the agenda were rearranged or postponed until next meeting in order to allow more time for the discussion of the golf course conditions.

1. Approval of Minutes

The Minutes of July 2, 2012, were accepted as submitted.

2. Rounds Report

Through August, 2012, rounds are up almost 12% over last year, primarily because of good weather in March and April. Out of town guests are the second highest revenue producing group. Several questions were asked regarding tracking non residents, and Fred Hunter told the audience that such tracking is not currently available.

3. Discussion of Course Conditions

Fred Hunter said that Dan Rackliffe would answer any and all questions. He asked that the audience address their questions to him, Chairman Hunter, after Dan provided a report. Fred asked for respect from everyone.

Dan Rackliffe's Report

There were heat waves in June and July. On July 12, it was 90 degrees. At 1:00 pm he watered where needed. At 2:30 a wind set in. He saw that the greens were wilting. He began watering again, but could not keep up with the wilting. The POA grass died from heat stress and wind. The shallow roots could not keep the moisture.

Except for #2, the last part of June, he noticed thinning. He reported the stress, sent samples and received negative reports. He said this has happened only twice in his experience.

As for #2, in addition to efforts to get more sun on the green by cutting away trees and underbrush, he has sought other advice and been told to (1)rebuild the green soil. A fan is on order and will arrive in the next week or so.

When asked if he had considered closing the #2 green until it healed, he said, "No." When asked if he had considered closing all the greens until they improve, he said, "No."

On #9, the right side is dry. He has to water more often. In hind sight, he thinks he should have done more frequent hand watering.

Mark Holod asked if other courses in the area were suffering. Dan said there was one other course in Fairfield County and maybe one in New Haven County.

Gary Solomon asked how we could stay ahead of this in the future, what is the “gold standard?” Dan replied that purchasing several water sensors might be helpful.

Patti Kondub asked three questions:

- (1) Why couldn't you (Dan) keep up in July to prevent the wilting? Dan said the wilting occurred within 20 minutes.
- (2) Is the rumor that someone sprayed the wrong chemical accurate? Dan replied that is not true. Heat and wind caused the stress.
- (3) Will the new fan blow the balls on the green? Dan said that that is possible. Golfers will have to wait for the oscillation before hitting.

Dan continued to describe what he has done to fix the greens. He has overseeded 7 times, but until cooler nights, we won't see germination.

He has pulled shallow aerification for the seeds, making more holes, causing less damage on the greens.

On hole #1, the traffic pattern on the left side may need to be changed so that golfers exit on the right side.

Joanna Nicholson asked about dead spots on fairways. Dan explained that some were wet wilt, #5 for example in the low lying area. He also said that some fairways are not doing well.

Jean Murdoch asked about rough areas around the greens that are in terrible condition, #6 for example. She spoke of general deterioration of the course. Dan said that he is seeing new varieties of grass he has never seen.

Patti Kondub asked about the geese and the solution that Norwalk is using. She referenced a letter to the editor. Fred said that insurance of the town did not cover residents using their dogs the way the Norwalk article described. Dan said that the new dog arrives September 17, but getting rid of resident geese will probably not happen.

Sean Doyle raised the issue of whether Dan had the resources to maintain the course in the condition it was after the renovation.

Ken Yormark said that he has played the course for 20 years and does not want to bring people to the course at this point. He thinks the biggest problem is the tee boxes, not the greens, which could happen. Tee boxes should be flat; instead they play like the rough. He asked if the golf superintendent proposed a budget for what he needed, or was he just told what he would get and have to live with it.

Rackliffe's response to the Tee box issue is that Tees are renovated every two years. He said he can't afford the top dressing more frequently than he is already doing it. When asked about using bent grass, he said it is not advised because it is slow to heal.

Fred Hunter said that it is hard to get support for Park and Rec. Revenue from the golf course goes back to the town to be reallocated. However, Fred said that Dan has gotten resources when things “go south.” At a later point in the discussion, Dan said that he expected to run above budget this year.

Michael Erdman said the #2 reason people move to the Town is the golf course; it is a Town jewel that is a mess. He explained that golfers raised the money for the \$3.6 million renovation, yet the town is not maintaining the jewel, yet it allocates \$1.1 million for Levitt Pavilion that is used by more out of towners than residents. He asked what the LMGA can do to change the process of support over the long term?

John Eehli asked the GAC what level of expectation they have about the way the course should be run. Is the budget in line with the expectation level?

He recommended that a study, with consultants, be made of the whole course and the way it should be run. He said that he thinks that is the GAC's responsibility.

Linda Clair agreed that we have to get the course back, and an outside evaluation is a good start.

Fred Hunter explained that the GAC makes recommendations and functions in an advisory capacity but that decisions are beyond the level of responsibility for the GAC.

Eehli said something has to come out of the meeting. Tough decisions need to be made, and he asks who makes them?

Dick Healy raised the issue of the geese, having counted 170 geese on #12 green last week. He has run 3 tournaments for the MGA in the last 3 weeks and had the worst complaints in 32 years. He said something has happened here.

Healy recommended that the GAC benchmark "best practices" from area courses. Hunter said there is a draft document currently ready for such benchmarking.

Fred also said that there is impetus for groups to get together, let the Selectman and RTM know the golfers' concerns. There are 1,000 members of the three golf associations who can work together, attend the Town budget meetings and P&R meetings.

Dave Eason said that the conditions of the course are unacceptable, that someone is not doing a job. Can shifts be rearranged? Is there enough staff to cover the course beyond 2:00 PM?

John Eehli asked where we go from here. He said the GAC should put in black and white how we got here and what level of expectation we have for getting the greens back.

Fred Hunter said that the GAC will put this together and get it out as soon as we can. He said the slow deterioration of the golf course has been made visible.

Dick Healy again asked for benchmarking. He also said that Dan should close the #2 green immediately despite the objections from others.

Bill Nasio (?) said that when he played three weeks ago the lightening alert did not work. He asked Dan why someone did not invest in canned horns. Fred said he would look into it with Stuart McCarthy.

Jim Harvey said players on tee box #15 can be hit from tee on #7. He wanted to know what happened to the fence that used to be there for protection.

Scott Smith said three groups of golfers have not been mentioned:

- (1) Golfers who don't replace divots or ball marks, or rake bunkers.
- (2) It "takes a village" to take care of the course: Cooper, starters, window staff, rangers.
- (3) Representation on the P&R Commission of someone with golf interests

As for #2, despite efforts to get more sun on the green by cutting away trees and underbrush, he has sought other advice and been told to (1) rebuild the green or move it, (2) dry ejection, or (3) hire SGD to help move water to the soil. A fan is on order and will arrive in the next week or so.

When asked if he had considered closing the #2 green until it healed, he said, "No." When asked if he had considered closing all the greens until they improve, and he said, "No."

4. Cliff's Place Final Report

Mark Holod, the driving force behind the project, reported that Cliff's Place opened three weeks ago and was turned over to the Town. The Town owns, insures, and maintains Cliff's Place. Just under \$200,000 was raised, and all of it was used.

Mark said that the new building meets all the requirements that had been set. He hopes that it will be used and enjoyed. Mark also said that the process for raising funds and implementing the project is a prototype for other town projects in the future.

Fred Hunter thanked all who donated time, money, and work. He said that the TV over the door will run the names of all donors. The Golf Channel is already working.

Fred also said that there will be a sign on the 9th hole with a number to call for food. Cell phones will be used. Gary Solomon said that most cell service on the course is weak, and he has a concern about emergency health needs since there is no land line for emergencies on the course. Others on the GAC and in the audience were also concerned about the need for emergency phone service.

Scott Smith raised the issue of an increase in the prices for food and Gatorade at Cliff's Place. Fred Hunter said that the concessionaire was responsible for pricing.

A question was raised about insurance coverage of the new building in case of a fire or other damage. Sean Doyle said that there is camera surveillance and an alarm in the new building. The town carries the insurance.

Fred asked that items # 5, 6, 7 and 8 of the agenda be postponed until next meeting and called for a motion to adjourn. Patti Kondub so moved.

The meeting adjourned at 9:31 PM

Respectfully submitted,

Joanna Nicholson
GAC Secretary