



THE COMMUNITY LINKS® WHITE PAPER

The time has come for struggling Municipal golf facilities to innovate, or close.

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Scottsdale Arizona
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Executive Summary

America's Municipalities are actively searching for ways to improve their golf facilities. Whether it's the hope an investment will one day show an ROI, to support golf course staff, or to appease a small group of avid golfers, the traditional mentality of investing into an asset that loses money is an uphill battle.

Budgets for improvements for these facilities have been put off due to lack of support from all levels of stakeholders. This has left the courses to support themselves on the merits of their designs, their unique property or locational attributes, or their pricing structure. All the while the course and its infrastructure continue to deteriorate. As a Municipal stakeholder, you need to do an evaluation of why exactly your course is a loser, and study a range of options to address its future. We hate to say it, but closing your course may make the most sense.

Municipal officials across the country are faced with providing mission critical services to their communities; not surprisingly the golf course is a lower priority than emergency services, schools, etc. Our experience with Municipalities however allows us to assert that when a facility has a clear vision supported by sustainable business practices and broad community engagement, the golf course can be one of the highest used and most appreciated assets offered.

The purpose of this paper is to identify how to approach Municipal golf differently.

In order for Municipal golf to prosper in the 21st century, stakeholders must be willing to look at their facilities differently. By approaching your golf course through clear vision and innovative thinking, a paradigm shift will occur as to what a Municipal golf course should be. Ultimately that vision should be for the golf course to not just exist, but to thrive as a true community asset; one that reflects the values and qualities of what makes your Municipality special. By reflecting golf's inherent values through your facility, the vision of a thriving community asset becomes a little clearer. We call this vision *Community Links*™.

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Course pictured on the cover: The Kids Course at Rockwind Community Links Hobbs, New Mexico – photo by Tony Roberts

Part 1 – The History of Municipal Golf

At the turn of the 20th century, the impacts of the second Industrial Revolution (1870-1914) were being felt across America. As the advancements of manufacturing, railroad networks, and city infrastructure continued, so too did societal demands for parks, open space, and recreation. Park planning visionaries such as Frederick Law Olmsted, who designed New York’s Central Park in the 1850’s, advocated for urban greenspaces and their importance in providing quality of life for working class Americans [1].

At that time, the growing middle class was embracing consumerism and leisure, and a change in attitudes toward recreational sport became more prevalent. The demand for public parks just happened to be increasing alongside the popularity of a curious new game from Scotland. This novel game of “golf” was played outdoors across large open landscapes, and provided healthy recreation in the same manner as strolling a trail or hillside, while providing a bit of friendly competition. To promote golf in the same vein of park planning was an easy case to make.

The popularity of golf spread due to the proliferation of affluent suburban country clubs, bringing rise to the private club model, seemingly only reserved for the rich; unfortunately, most Americans were financially unable to join such clubs. It was during the early 1890’s that Municipal officials and taxpayers began to hear from golf advocates that the inherent qualities of golf parlayed nicely with park planning, and that Municipal golf facilities should be considered an option for the average, working class American [2].

Finally in 1895, Van Cortlandt Park Golf Course opened as the first Municipal golf facility in Riverdale (Bronx), NY. It was an immediate success. Soon after cities such as Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh followed suit, and Municipal golf began to spread throughout the country. In April, 1913, the New York Times reported:

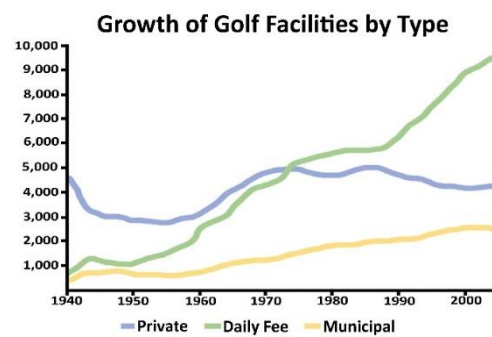
“A great wave of agitation for public golf links is sweeping through the United States, and in such a decisive fashion as to make it only a matter of time when each city of large size will have a course of its own for the rank and file [2].”

–NYT article excerpt, April 13, 1913

As it went, Municipal roots in golf were focused on providing a service, much like a library or community park; not to make money, but to provide an amenity. This early sentiment however, has been largely lost due to ever increasing pressures to perform financially.

Part 2 – A Failing Model

Over the past 75 years, golf has transitioned from a primarily private-club game, to one that is widely available to the public. Worth noting is that prior to the recession that began in 2007, Municipal Golf facilities had maintained a steady 15% “golf facility supply” share since 1950. Interestingly, in 2005 when golf facility supply slowed to net zero (facility closings equal openings), “Daily Fee” golf facilities peaked at 58% of the market; up from 23% in 1950. Private Golf facilities conversely fell from 62% in 1950 to 27% in 2005 [3].



Daily Fee Includes Semi Private, Source: NGF [3]

While Municipal golf facility growth remained constant over those very telling 75 years, entrepreneurs stepped in to fill the golf facility supply demand, as both golf's popularity and the US population boomed. These facilities became known as Daily Fee facilities, and they were explicitly built to make a profit.

As time passed, Daily Fee facilities slowly began to provide the "higher end" experience historically reserved for private clubs in an attempt to compete with the highly-manicured, resort-styled courses. The term "member for the day" became commonplace and many Municipal facilities followed suit. Their courses became longer and more difficult, daily maintenance expectations increased, and a "one size fits all" mentality began to take hold. Golf was booming and the national golf craze showed no signs of slowing.

This emerging trend was a marked divergence from the original intent of the Municipal facility.

While the intent of the Daily Fee facility was to make a profit, the original intent of the Municipal facility was to allow access to the everyday golfer; the individuals that wanted to learn the game, pay a fair price, and simply enjoy some golf. Over the past 25 years, the emphasis on a communal amenity and bringing new players to the game was essentially eliminated from the market. The one area of the golf market originally intended to allow access for everyone, had been declining as "member for the day" facilities were increasing.

Fast forward to 2016; what's left are a series of average courses, on average sites, with deteriorating infrastructures. The industry has remained rocky for the last decade and stagnant for the past 3 years, while golf course supply in 2015 saw another 1% reduction (203 permanent closures) [4]; a 5% net loss in facility supply since 2007 [5]. The current golf participation rate remains down 20% from 30 million participants in 2005, to 24 million in 2015 [6], and golf course management firms are increasingly hired in an attempt to relieve struggling facilities from current industry woes, with mixed results.

It's worth noting that many Municipalities are increasingly stretched to raise tax revenues for all operations and there's increasing competition for allocations by the municipality to support vital services (police, fire, schools). Compound low participation rates with undistinguishable products, a saturated market, ailing infrastructure, debt, pressures to be sustainable, and unenthusiastic officials, and you have Municipal golf in America. The Daily Fee "member for the day" profit driven model is still overwhelmingly prevalent, and not much seems to be changing.



DID YOU KNOW?

On Sundays, the *Old Course at St. Andrew's* in Scotland (1552), arguably the world's most well-known golf course, prohibits golf? One day per week the course becomes a popular public park for all to enjoy. The stakeholders forfeit revenue on one of the busiest days for golf in the spirit of community and tradition. The Old Course is indeed a "crowned jewel" to local residents, and perhaps the greatest example of what community golf represents [7].

Part 3 – Community Links- An Alternative for Success

Community Links was created to not only invigorate Municipal golf facilities, but to revitalize lack-luster and struggling communities through the valuable characteristics of the game of golf. *Healthy living, being outdoors, and lively recreation* are significant factors in golf’s wide appeal.

Municipal golf has continued pressure to be profitable because 92% of the tax-paying community doesn’t play golf [6]. Other Municipal amenities such as libraries, public parks, museums, etc., are under far less scrutiny to perform because they’re perceived as beneficial to the *entire* community. Therein lies the opportunity for the golf facility; playing to innate advantages that would benefit 100% of the community. Fortunately, such advantages just so happen to reflect positive trends in today’s society.

As the last paragraph of the previous section points out, Municipal golf is up against a stacked deck. Therefore, Staples Golf confidently affirms that *the time has come for struggling Municipal golf facilities to innovate, or close*. It’s not fair to the golfers, the tax-payers, or to the game of golf for Municipal stakeholders to avoid real solutions. We resolutely encourage these stakeholders to identify non-traditional opportunities congruent with Community Links, with the aim to radically improve their golf facilities.

When Municipal stakeholders are devoted to attracting 100% of the community to their golf facility, a variety of benefits become apparent: broad communal support, enhanced value, healthier citizens, increased patronage, stronger community, new potential golfers.

Opportunity #1- Health and Wellness. Being in nature is proven to reduce anxiety and depression, decrease stress, increase energy, increase immunity, etc. etc. [8]. Facility improvement approaches that take into account the *biophilia hypothesis* [9], “prescriptive parks [10],” and American Disabilities Act [11] upgrades, will diversify their user-base and add welcomed features for the entire community.

How could your golf facility better embrace Health and Wellness?

Opportunity #2- Family and Kids. Parents seemingly have less and less time to spend with their children due to the increased demand for their time. Additionally, growing concerns for how children are spending their time when a parent is not around, places emphasis on spending true quality time when parent-child time is available.

What ways can your golf facility focus on family activities and child-centered programs?

% of Parents Concerned About Their Child's:

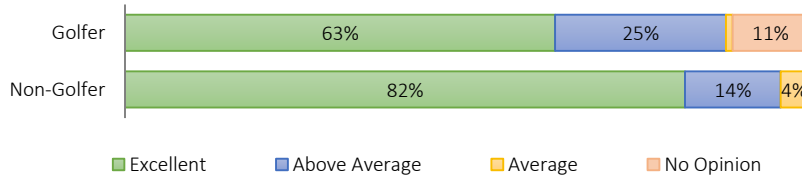


SOURCE: NGF [12]

Opportunity #3- Diversity of “Ownership.” Strong civic pride is invaluable, and Municipal golf facilities that can cross-promote themselves to their entire community through activities, programs, and events, will strengthen their sense of community, and position themselves for future successes. Open greenspace dedicated to education, local farmers markets, musical/ theatrical performances, health oriented programs, etc., should increasingly become the ways municipalities are marketing their community to residents.

How could your golf facility be more inclusive?

When Asked to Rate Trails and Community Space at Rockwind Community Links (RCL)

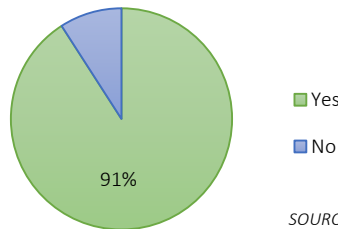


SOURCE: SGRG [13]

Opportunity #4- Conservation and Education. The subject of responsible resource stewardship and environmental conservation has evolved from a modest social movement in the 1960’s, to a philosophical influence on global production today, no matter the industry or scale. Placing an increased emphasis on sustainability at the course should be a priority, observable to most facility users, and celebrated if and where possible.

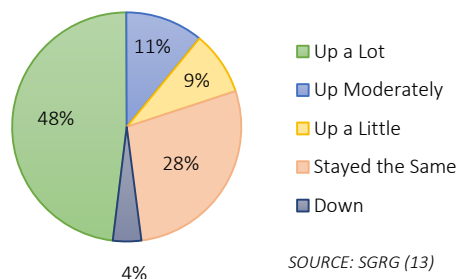
How could your golf facility embrace sustainability, conservation, and education while promoting your efforts?

Non-Golfer When Asked if They're More Likely To Try Golf at RCL



SOURCE: SGRG (13)

Golfer Participation Change at RCL



SOURCE: SGRG (13)

Part 4 – A Community Links Case Study

In late 2013, Ocotillo Park Golf Course (as it was known at the time) in Hobbs, NM, suffered from the familiar ailments most aging Municipal golf facilities eventually end up with; an outdated irrigation system, forever increasing maintenance costs, falling participation rates, and a serious lack of revenue. The vision of Community Links, having already been conceived two years earlier, fit perfectly with the needs of the project.

When the Community Links concept was shared with City of Hobbs officials, there was an immediate connection. Designing a golf course that appealed to families, kids, beginner golfers, *and* the accomplished golfer, while also finding that right mix of community uses to attract the non-golfing residents, became the charge. Five “7-0 votes” in favor by the City Council later, and the first completed vision of Community Links came to be. Everyone involved has agreed; *the selling point that streamlined this grand project was the idea of a Municipal facility for the entire community.*

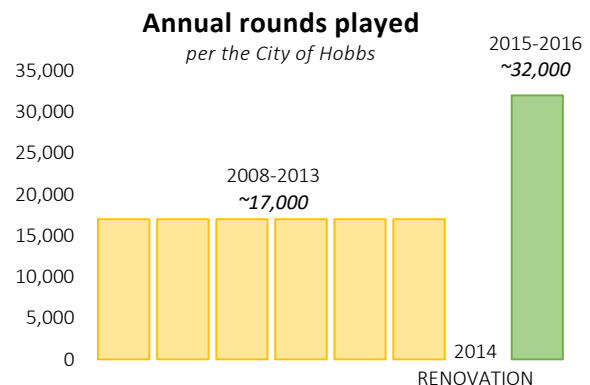
Rockwind Community Links, as it’s now known, is positioned today quite differently within the community than it was previously. Rockwind has created an opportunity for its residents to focalize the specific values important to them, and has encouraged unity, growth, and healthy habits, while also promoting an appreciation for the environment. Further, Rockwind Community Links stresses constructive qualities to the youth like integrity, discipline, etiquette, patience, and sportsmanship, which create positive, long lasting attitudes.

The golf course is now a focal point for multiple community uses including a comprehensive trail system, dedicated open space for sanctioned events and public use, and a 5 acre lake centralized for community enjoyment. Additional auxiliary space for local events was added to the clubhouse and a standalone classroom was built specifically for youth golfers. Non-traditional marketing initiatives have further reinforced the goals of how this golf course will continue to serve its residents.

Since opening Rockwind in May of 2015, the City has been honored by the likes of *Golf Digest*, *Golf Inc.*, the *American Society of Golf Course Architects*, and PGA Tour Star *Fred Couples*.

Additionally, and perhaps most importantly is the emphasis of Rockwind’s *vision*; that vision (*or brand*) is basically the way their customers, or in this case, *their community*, perceives their facility, and ultimately the area in which they live. Their vision establishes the ethos and the DNA, of what the City of Hobbs is trying to portray today and into the foreseeable future. It is the guiding light for management, staff, and for patrons of the facility. All of whom have sung the City’s praises for the unique approach of allowing the game of golf to play a central role in how they provide services to their residents.

Aside from the many kudos and awards Rockwind Community Links has received thus far, the tangible results being seen are very encouraging. Revenue has dramatically increased, usage by golfers has nearly doubled, non-golfers are embracing their new facility, and youth instruction of golf is at all-time highs and growing. Included herein is data from internal polling collected through the participation of a Rockwind Community Links Survey, administered by Staples Golf to Rockwind patrons on December 4th and 5th, 2015 ^[13].



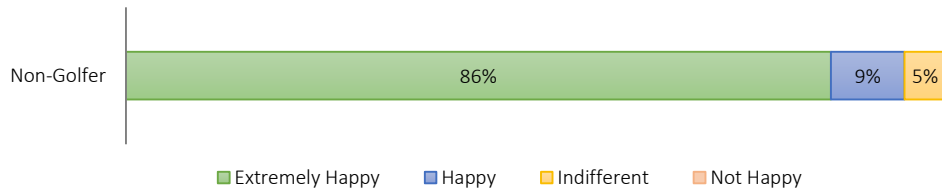
Conclusion

At the inception of Municipal golf in the US, the goal had been to serve a unique and very important segment of the golf market; those who desired accessibility and affordability. As the golf industry evolved, that segment continued to be unwittingly neglected. As it stands, the current business model is broken, and will likely continue to be broken unless real change is initiated.

The opportunity to innovate for Municipal facilities has never been more warranted than now. In today's uncertain golf environment, Municipal golf should take the necessary steps to diversify in ways stakeholders haven't even begun to imagine, creating new, exciting solutions in the process.

We would like to leave with you with a quote from the fabled golf legend Ben Hogan; "The most important shot in golf is the next one." For Municipal stakeholders, this should mean the time has come to actually do something about your ailing facility. We at Staples Golf believe that Municipal golf is primed for another great chapter! We hope you will join us in telling that story; the story of how Municipal golf came to greatly prosper through innovation, community inclusion, and responsible resource management.

When Asked How Happy with City's Decision to Invest in RCL



SOURCE: SGRG (13)

About Staples Golf

Staples Golf Resource Group, LLC. dba Staples Golf Design is a Scottsdale based golf course architecture and consultancy firm in the business of turning around Municipal golf facilities. The social, economic, and environmental viability of these facilities is where we focus our attention.

Since our founding in 2002, we've worked with 125+ Municipal, Daily-Fee and Private golf facilities in the areas of course assessments, resource efficiency, master planning, and renovation. Since August, 2014, Staples Golf has under gone a rigorous outreach program to over 1,400 Municipal administrations throughout 30 states. Our conversations with City, County, and Park District administrators regarding their golf facilities have been immensely helpful in shaping this resource and our perspective.



NEXT STEPS

The question Municipal stakeholders should ask themselves now is “What’s next?” The steps below are intentionally obvious and simplistic; too often they’re over-complicated. These aren’t suggestions; if you have a step you cannot overcome, it’s likely there will be no change to your facility.

Step One - Identify Pertinent Stakeholders: This includes the stakeholder officials, golf course staff, and select members of the community at large. Other relevant members should be included where appropriate; finance, engineering, etc.

Step Two - Get Buy-In: If any of the top stakeholders are not interested in having this conversation, you’re most likely dead in the water. If the course is in real trouble, and top officials refuse to make solutions a priority, move towards repurposing the facility. It’s only fair to the tax-payers.

Step Three - Determine Professional Assessment: A thorough and professional consultant should assess the facility. This can be done affordably, and is crucial in understanding how to proceed. Consider their report a “roadmap” to success.

Step Four - Appeal to the Community: If facility needs have been put off repeatedly, change the approach. Position your facility’s improvements around the entire community (consider Community Links), and get the support needed to fund the project; innovate.

Step Five - Approve a Master Plan: The most successful clubs today work from a Master Plan. A golf facility, specifically the course, starts deteriorating the day it opens. Similarly to a Municipal budget, its prosperity is determined by its handlers.

Step Six - Do Not Deviate from the Plan: This is the make or break step. Countless plans are collecting dust because it was pushed down the priority list. This failure to act is what we call a relapse; *stick to the plan!*

These steps are easier said than done, but progress doesn’t happen without intentionality. What you and other stakeholders do from here, will determine the success of your golf facility.

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