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Jackson Park Threatened: the Golf Course Proposal

The threat:

Mayor Rahm Emanuel and his appointed Park District CEO Mike Kelly propose a significant expansion and merger of the Jackson Park and South Shore golf courses designed to benefit pro golfers who visit for infrequent championship-level tournaments at the expense of key recreational and natural areas used by Chicagoans on a regular basis. The proposed expanded golf course would eliminate a nature sanctuary adjacent to the South Shore Cultural Center, the Jackson Bark dog park, the only one on the south side, and two basketball courts, two sets of tennis courts, a soccer field, a baseball diamond, two playlots, and the riding arena at the SSCC.

Jackson Park Watch opposes the proposal:

Jackson Park Watch opposes the expanded golf course proposal, while welcoming improvements to the golf courses that stay within the current footprint, as originally announced.

If you share JPW concerns and don't need to know more, skip to the end for people to write or call. But here is more detailed information:

1. Where did this proposal come from?

The Mayor, Park District CEO Mike Kelly, and some golf course entrepreneurs developed this proposal out of public view, starting in 2015. Late in 2016 they created a public-private entity, the Chicago Parks Golf Alliance, to hire staff to promote the idea, do community outreach, and start fund-raising. The proposal – much more modest at the time and described as a “restoration” – was first announced, without details, in December, 2016.

2. Would this “restoration” bring economic benefits to South Shore?

Promoters have repeatedly claimed that the golf course project would bring economic development to South Shore. However, the expanded proposal locates a new golf course “pavilion” (a.k.a. club house) at Hayes (63rd) and Cornell Drive, not in South Shore, meaning that economic benefits for the 71st street commercial corridor near the South Shore Cultural Center would be near zero. Similarly, in response to questions about parking capacity, the promoters revealed that participants and spectators for major tournaments would be housed downtown and bussed to and from the tournament, eliminating time spent in the neighborhood outside the golf course area itself and thus any possible economic benefits.

3. How much would this cost and who would pay?

The real answers are not known, nor it is known what portion would ultimately fall on Chicago taxpayers. The promoters have said that private funding would be raised for the golf course work itself, and their initial estimate for that work was \$30 million, of which around \$6 million would come from the Park District. In addition to that work on the course, there would be major *public* infrastructure projects: first, the needed shoreline restoration along the South Shore golf course lakefront, possibly involving the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, for which there is no current estimate; and second, the construction of two underpasses to link the golf course segments, unofficial estimates for which are steep. A cost projection of \$30 million has gone unchallenged by the promoters, suggesting to some that the total cost could be far higher.

4. The promoters claim this is carrying out plans established in the 1999-2000 "Framework" plan. Is this true?

The Framework plan envisioned golf course improvements but not a merger, not PGA-level course, and certainly not an expansion.

5. What about the impact on the natural areas? the nature sanctuary? trees? birding?

The expanded golf course and driving range proposals would take out hundreds if not over a thousand trees. It would dramatically cut back on the existing nature sanctuary adjacent to the South Shore Cultural Center (ironically, establishing the sanctuary was an goal of the 1999-2000 Framework plan). The promoters claim that new "natural areas" suited for bird-watching, picnicking or walking would be created in the interior of the golf course between the fairways but no details are available, and it is unclear how non-golfers would be able to use such areas safely on a general basis.

6. What about the impact on existing recreational uses?

The expanded golf course and driving range proposals would take out two basketball courts at Cornell and Marquette Drives, two sets of tennis courts at Hayes (63rd) and Cornell Drive, a nearby soccer field and baseball diamond, two playlots along 67th Street, and the riding arena at South Shore, all well-used. It would also eliminate the area's only dog park, the much loved Jackson Bark, located on an abandoned tennis court to the north of the driving range.

7. The 1999 Framework plan and more recent proposals for reconfiguring uses in Jackson Park have all proposed relocating the driving range so that it would be adjacent to the golf course and making that space (a "great lawn" in Olmsted's original plan) available to the general public for passive recreational uses. Early discussions by the Golf Alliance also included that idea. Why the change?

Golf course designer Beau Welling says that the driving range needs to be kept where it is and expanded (thus eliminating Jackson Bark) because pro golfers who may use it on occasion need to practice longer shots.

8. What about benefits to existing golfers?

Promoters of the expanded golf course proposal have secured the support of some existing golfers. Others, however, question whether the courses will continue to be affordable if this proposed projects moved ahead. Some also say that the courses are fine as they now are.

9. What about youth golf programs?

Much has been made of the expanded youth golf programs the promoters promise. Such programs could and should continue without expanding the golf courses beyond their current footprints. Also, youth golf programs already operated by existing golf clubs have been sadly overlooked.

10. Is this a golf course “restoration”?

The promoters continually insist that this is a golf course “restoration.” Given the expansion considerably beyond the original footprint and plans revealed by Mark Roling on June 24 to move earth and trees and reshape water features, that remains to be seen. Some are already looking to what additional reviews and regulations might be triggered by changes beyond “restoration.”

READY TO TAKE ACTION? HERE IS WHO TO WRITE OR CALL:

1. Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s office. The Mayor appoints the Park District CEO and Board members. Deputy Mayor Andrea Zopp opened the first of the recent “community conversation” sessions saying “we are here to listen.” Let her (and the Mayor) know what you think at:
e-mail: Andrea.Zopp@cityofchicago.com

2. Alderman Leslie Hairston.
phone: 773-324-5555
e-mail: Leslie.Hairston@cityofchicago.org

3. Park District CEO Mike Kelly
phone: 312-742-4200
e-mail: Michael.Kelly@chicagoparkdistrict.com

You can also enter your comments and concerns on the Park District’s special website <https://southlakefrontplan.com/>. However, do not expect to hear back or to know what has been done with your input, so do not make that your only line of communication.

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Jackson Park Watch