

# TALK OF THE towns & TOPICS

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## Tee Time?

Is a municipal golf course  
an economic development  
hole-in-one?


*see story page 12*





# Municipal Golf Course Adds Value to a Community

By Raymond Hearn, ASGCA, ASLA



The Old Course at St. Andrews is arguably one of the best known municipal golf courses in the world. Golf has been played at St. Andrews since the early 1400s. It wasn't until 1764 that the golf course became 18 holes. The Old Course at St. Andrews is interwoven into the Town of St. Andrews in Scotland and is an integral part of the fabric of this community. The origin of municipal golf courses in America dates back to the late 19th century. The first municipal golf course in America was Van Cortlandt Golf Course in New York founded in 1895.

Back in America, the State of New York is home to some of the country's great municipal golf courses. The municipal course at the Bethpage State Park's Black Course in Farmingdale, New York is considered by many golf enthusiasts as one of America's best golf courses. The National Golf Foundation reports that there are currently 121 municipal golf courses in the State of New York. The golf industry in New York is a healthy billion-dollar industry and employs thousands of people.

So why do so many people play golf? One reason is that it is a sport that can be played from youth until late into your senior years. In 2018, 33.5 million people played golf and 25 million played golf multiple times in the USA. According to Forbes Magazine, a record 2.6 million played golf for the first time. Golf is an \$84 billion industry that employs over 2 million people. It has also been labeled as one of the most social games on the earth. Each municipal golf course adds value to its surrounding community. Golfers typically spend money in various other businesses in a community before and after their golf round (gas, food, lodging, gifts, etc.). This is especially true for municipal golf courses that can attract golfers from outside the course's community. So the next logical question would be, what value do municipal golf courses add to their community? The answer is a great deal. The following is a partial list:

- **Economic benefits**
  - o Jobs
  - o Added tourism
  - o Increase in hospitality
  - o Increased adjacent property values
- **Environmental benefits**
  - o Open space
  - o Cleans air and water
  - o Wildlife habitat

Royal Ashton Golf Club's Old Course does not have one single bunker on the golf course and still provides great strategy and appeal for golfers.

- o Wetland habitat
- o Stormwater detention
- o Contaminated re-purpose land use

- **Recreational benefits**

- o Exercise and fitness
- o Active recreation
- o Competitive sport
- o Noncompetitive sport
- o Synergy with parks

- **Social benefits**

- o Relaxation
- o Social interaction
- o New friendships
- o Mental well-being
- o Lower crime

A couple of new trends are emerging in municipal golf course renovation:

- Restoration of certain historical aspects that have been lost over time.
- Creation of multi-functional recreational uses within or adjacent to the golf course.
- The less-equals-more

remodeling approach, producing a better playing experience while reducing the course's annual maintenance.

But first let's start with a basic question, "Why remodel?" One reason is that certain golf course materials just reach the end of their lifecycle, wear out and no longer work, such as irrigation, drainage, cart paths, greensmix, teemix, bunkers, etc. All these items wear out and have to be replaced. In other cases, golf rounds and / or green fees start to decrease because existing golf patrons get tired of the course, and the course stops attracting new patrons. The golf course just gets old, tired and boring. Restaurants and hotels often face the same problems and have to remodel just to keep existing patrons and attract new ones. Many successful golf course operators have told me that once you stop showing patrons (existing and new) that you are improving is the day you start failing. The downward spiral seems to feed on itself for golf courses that take this approach and is

often a sad, slow and painful decline.

### **Golf Course Restoration and Renovation**

A popular trend is for the restoration and renovation of historic golf courses (pre-1940) where the original designer's design intent has been lost over time. In the practice of restoration of golf course features or course strategy that has been lost, both have to be harmonized with the modern-day equipment and modern-day hitting distances. The allure of bringing back lost or hidden historic features is romantic to many individuals whether it involves building architecture, landscape architecture or golf course architecture. It is widely held by many prominent golf authorities that some of the best golf courses in America were created in what was called the "Golden Age of Golf Design" from 1910 to 1937. (I also feel that certain pre-1910 historic gems may also be candidates for restoration.)

Golf course restoration and renovation is an art and a science, and also a tricky business. First, you have to determine whether the restoration is even worth doing – what needs to be restored (in location, form or even in principle), what needs to be renovated and what is fine to leave as is. Just because a lost feature or lost playing angle is old, doesn't always mean that it is worth restoring. To do the restoration process justice takes a lot of time and a lot of research. Researching the history and digging up old aerials, photos, plans, sketches and articles is a lot of fun, but you better be prepared to commit to the time it takes. In some cases, you have courses that have done an excellent job in preserving the items mentioned above. In other cases, fires, floods or carelessness have destroyed all or most of the course's historical items, and in these cases your research time becomes even more time consuming.

Golf course restoration doesn't simply entail overlaying an old historical aerial or routing plan on the modern-day aerial and bringing all the features back. Restoration can also involve restoring the original designer's design intent by calibrating early-1900 play angles and hitting



Goodwin Park Municipal Golf Course Master Plan harmonized with the Olmstead Park System and includes fishing, hiking, jogging, bird watching and more.

distances with current-day hitting distances. Another form of restoration is to pay homage to the original designer's shapes and forms. The golf course architect's end result should always be for the course to have more strategy, shot value and playability for all golfers of different skill levels. The course experience should be interesting, fun and fair.

Golf course remodeling and renovation are interchangeable terms used by many golf course architects and involves improving the courses infrastructure or design while not preserving the original design. This is also a popular practice that can be accomplished with or without restoration. In any case, the golf course playing experience, course conditions and aesthetics are improved. Some also refer to this as rehabilitation.

The comprehensive long-range master plan created for the Schenectady Municipal Golf Course in Schenectady, NY involved both golf course restoration and remodeling. The improvements added to the overall appeal and popularity of a golf course that was already very popular. The master plan includes restoration and / or renovation improvements to specific greens, tees, fairways, bunkers, ponds, cart path, trees, drainage and irrigation.

### ***Creating Multi-Functional Recreational Uses Within or Adjacent to the Golf Course***

I could create three more articles just on this subject alone. When room allows, many municipal golf courses provide other amenities throughout or adjacent to the golf course proper such as:

- Walking and jogging trails
- Biking trails
- Bird watching stations
- Fishing
- Yoga
- Pickle ball
- Frisbee golf
- Foot golf
- Short course within the main course
- Par three course within a



New multi-functional driving range, par 3 course and short game area (ASGCA Design Excellence Award)

driving range

- Golf performance and training center
- Bocce ball
- Picnic areas
- ***The list goes on and on.***

While this multi-functional approach is practical for resort, private and public golf courses, I believe it is most applicable to municipal golf courses that are often associated with an adjacent park and / or park-like recreational amenities. When adding new recreational amenities to an existing golf course, a professional golf course architect should be hired to properly establish spatial relationships and spacing with the existing golf course. The multi-functional approach is not always an appropriate option for every golf course; sometimes, space just doesn't allow for it, or the community and golf patrons only want the "pure" solo golf experience.

On page 14, the picture is of a multi-functional master plan for the historic

Goodwin Park Golf Course with its treasured Fredrick Law Olmsted-designed park system.

The multi-functional master plan above includes a driving range that can also be operated as a nine-hole par 3 course and short game training area. The owners of this facility also intend to develop a golf course training center building that will include golf simulators and golf swing analysis programs.

For the City of Detroit's Rouge Park Municipal Golf Course, we created a new clubhouse and parking plan that would allow for: added banquet space, new deck, added parking, better views of the Rouge River and #18 green, while creating space for a nine-hole Bentgrass putting course.

### ***Less Equals More Remodeling Approach***

In certain cases, some golf courses have too many course features and an excessive amount of turf areas that need mowing, fertilizing, weed control and irrigation, potentially burdening the overall maintenance

budget. The overriding goal has to be to improve the golf course's shot value, strategy and playability for all levels of golfing ability. I remember one architect saying, I have such large greens and so many bunkers on this particular design that I have never calculated the totals. I was amazed by the arrogance of the statement.

In some cases, this reduction is difficult to achieve in certain golf course layouts. In other layouts, where there is a mindless excessive abundance of bunkers or turfgrass surface area, this is definitely achievable. I take great pride when this the "less-equals-more" approach is achieved. Golf course architects can't always achieve this but when this is achieved, the end product is appreciated by everyone (golfers, management and employees). On the flip side, when this practice is overdone, reducing too many amenities could "dumb down" the golf course design, reduce the experience and drive away patrons. So great care, time and attention much be adhered to when considering this approach. Make sure your golf course architect has extensive experience in this area before hiring them.

The Sea Oaks Golf Course (NJ) has less maintained area that equals more in terms of strategy and beauty with less maintenance. □

### About the author

Raymond Hearn is a veteran golf course architect and a member of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, the American Society of Landscape Architects and the United States Golf Association. His company specializes in golf course restoration and renovation throughout the Northeast, Midwest and Southeast. For more information or to contact his office, please visit his web site at [www.rhgd.com](http://www.rhgd.com) or email him at [ray@rhgd.com](mailto:ray@rhgd.com).



Restoration remodeling plan for Schenectady Municipal Golf Course in New York



Ray Hearn designed Sea Oaks Golf Course (NJ)



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