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Revitalizing the Municipal Model: A Case Study of Winter Park Golf Course

by

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Business Studies

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Abstract

This thesis aims to provide a well-substantiated possible course of action for municipalities facing uncertain futures with their golf facilities. The trend of failing municipal golf courses has become prevalent since 2007, resulting in an overall decrease in the number of municipal facilities throughout the country. This is an unfortunate reality, as municipal golf plays a key role in introducing the sport to a racially and socio-economically diverse group of people, and has also played a crucial part in combatting golf's traditional issues with racism and elitism. Ultimately, because of the accessibility and model of equality provided by municipal golf courses, municipalities are justified in investing in golf, despite questions of purpose and financial viability.

Winter Park Golf Course, a nine-hole municipal facility in Winter Park, Florida provides a model for how other municipalities can invest and change their failing facilities to make them more successful from both a financial and accessibility standpoint. After undergoing a significant renovation in the mid-2010s, the previously-failing course now experiences a high amount of success. This success, which is evidenced by revenue that is nearly double what it was prior to the renovation, is because of a strategically designed golf course that caters to all types of players, as well as a number of events, organizations, and initiatives that welcome and benefit golfers and non-golfers in the community. The course's leadership, as well as the changes to the physical design and creation of wide array of events, serve as important lessons for other municipalities. In the end, trying to follow certain aspects of the Winter Park model would serve struggling municipal courses well.

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Introduction: The Problem for Municipal Golf

On November 20, 2018, the Westborough Country Club Operating Committee convened for their weekly meeting regarding the operations of Westborough Country Club, a municipally-owned golf course in Westborough, Massachusetts. While on the surface Westborough may appear to be the ideal place for a golf course, as the suburban town is home to an affluent, well-educated, adult population¹, this was not translating to success for the course itself. Although it had been a staple in the town since 1921, centrally located within walking distance of the town's center and home to a traditionally dedicated membership base, in 2018, the course was far from thriving.

In 2016, the course had generated \$396,507² of revenue for the town, the bulk of it from the aforementioned strong membership. In 2017, though, these figures dropped as the course generated only \$386,477.07 including a nearly \$4,000 drop in membership fees. In isolation, these figures do not appear overly concerning. A one year drop of approximately 2.5% is theoretically within a margin of error based on weather conditions impacting course availability and in addition to this, golf, according to conventional wisdom, was dying, so perhaps a drop of *only* 2.5% was something to be celebrated. There was, however, an issue.

Within the meeting minutes from the Operating Committee throughout the two-year period from 2016 to 2018 was a troubling trend. While traditionally the golf course had covered investment activities with their reserve fund, this reserve was being depleted. While this reserve

¹ "Town Profile," Westborough Economic Development Committee, accessed September 23, 2019, <https://edc.town.westborough.ma.us/about-us/pages/town-profile>)

² "2016 Annual Town Report" (Town of Westborough, MA, November 7, 2016), https://www.town.westborough.ma.us/sites/westboroughma/files/uploads/atr_2016.pdf)

was being depleted, labor and maintenance costs continued to rise. What was the result of dropping revenues, a depleting reserve, and increasing operating costs? The course was losing money and, even worse, the situation did not appear to be getting better.

The committee anticipated that “golf revenue for 2019 [would] come in short” and that “any extra revenue collected [in 2019 would] just go toward the loss [and] there will likely still be a loss”³. Given these circumstances, what then could the town do to make the course more successful? Westborough Country Club is far from the only municipal course dealing with an uncertain future. Since 2007, *seven percent* of municipal courses have closed⁴. This, along with other negative factors, force municipal courses to ask the question of how to be more successful.

The question of success is at the core of this thesis. While revenue is one measure of success for a municipal golf course, this does not capture the entire picture of the role that these facilities *should* play in their communities. Instead, there is an added layer of responsibility involving trying to benefit more than just the golfing population of a given town or city that must be included when evaluating the success of a municipal golf course. This is a function of the fact that a course is supported through town money and infrastructure, and thus, like any other government-owned entity, should approach success from a common good perspective. This common good then manifests itself in the ability of the course to both provide an approachable introduction to golf, as well as, arguably more importantly, having the be able to function as

³ “Westborough Country Club Operating Committee Meeting Minutes November 20, 2018 ”(Town of Westborough, MA, November 20, 2018), https://www.town.westborough.ma.us/sites/westboroughma/files/minutes/wcc_2018.11.20.pdf, 2.

⁴ John Reitman, “Industry Trends: What Golf Facilities Are (Most) at Risk?,” TurfNet (Turnstile Publishing Company, July 3, 2018), <https://www.turfnet.com/news.html/industry-trends-what-golf-facilities-are-most-at-risk-r1075/>), para. 9.

space that can be utilized by non-golfing community members. Now, if the concepts of profitability and the common good were mutually exclusive, then trying to achieve this lofty goal may be futile work; however, in recent years, it has been proven that they can be achieved simultaneously. Winter Park Golf course provides the example of how a municipality can do this and, in the process answers the focal question, regarding possible courses of action: How can a municipality reimagine their golf course to make it both a better revenue source and an asset to the golfing and non-golfing population in the community?

Before examining this central question, however, one must first work through a number of related issues and concepts. Among these are a basic understanding of municipal golf and its role within the sport as a whole, the tradition of municipal courses making golf more accessible, the benefits of golf courses to a community, the state of participation in golf since 2000, and the current problems with golf. By addressing these issues, one builds an understanding of why a municipality should invest in golf, why municipal courses are important to their communities, and how the game arrived to the point that many municipal courses, like Westborough Country Club, have been forced to reconsider their business models. The ultimate result of answering these questions and then examining the lessons from Winter Park Golf Course's success is that the reader is left with a clear, well-substantiated possible course of action going forward for municipalities facing the question of what should be done with their golf course. In a way, this functions best as a dynamic resource for local governments trying to research investment avenues regarding municipally-owned facilities.

The History and Role of Municipal Golf

A municipal golf course is a golf course owned by a government. Typically, this government is a town or city. These facilities are open to the public, and are often priced lower, especially for residents of the given community, than privately owned facilities⁵. The quality of courses ranges “from poor to outstanding”⁶, with the amount of money invested in the facility being one of the biggest determinants in the final quality of the course. Quality in this case refers to the conditions of the playing surfaces and, to a lesser extent, infrastructure surrounding the course.



*Phil Mickelson hits a shot at the 2002 United States Open Championship at Bethpage State Park Black Golf Course
Photo Courtesy: AP Photo/Mark Lennihan*

New York’s Bethpage State Park Black Golf Course is perhaps the most-well known municipal golf course as it “stepped into the national spotlight in 2002 as the first ever non-

⁵ Brent Kelley, “What Is a Municipal Golf Course,” Live About, March 7, 2019, <https://www.liveabout.com/what-is-a-municipal-golf-course-1560921>)

⁶ Ibid., para. 6.

resort, public-access course to host the U.S. Open”⁷ and currently ranks as the eighth best public course in the country according to Golf Digest⁸, one of the leading golf-specific publications in the United States. While this is an extreme example of the success of a facility, and in some ways represents an unrealistic goal⁹, it still illustrates the immense possibilities of a municipal facility with the right mix of pedigree, funding, and location. While Bethpage Black was designed and built in 1936¹⁰, municipal golf was an existing concept prior to this.

Arguably, the tradition of municipal golf began in Scotland. The Old Course at St. Andrews, known colloquially as the Home of Golf, is “essentially a municipal course”¹¹ as it is managed by a Trust on behalf of the people of St. Andrews and Fife, who technically own the course. That being said, although there is a clear root of municipal ownership, it was not and is not the norm today in the British Isles, a misconception held by some golfers. Instead, courses have transitioned to a private model with public access¹². So, while aspects of municipal golf

⁷ Michael McCartin, “Making a Model Municipal Facility: A Case Study of East Potomac Park Golf Course,” *Making a Model Municipal Facility: A Case Study of East Potomac Park Golf Course* (dissertation, University of Georgia, 2008), https://getd.libs.uga.edu/pdfs/mccartin_michael_a_200805_mla.pdf, 64.

⁸ Ron Whitten, “America's 100 Greatest Public Courses,” Golf Digest (Discovery Golf, May 2019), <https://www.golfdigest.com/gallery/americas-100-greatest-public-courses-ranking>

¹⁰ “Bethpage State Park Golf Courses,” Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (New York State), accessed September 25, 2019, <https://parks.ny.gov/golf/11/details.aspx>

¹¹ Adam Lawrence, “Municipal Courses: Spreading the Gospel of Golf for over a Century,” Golf Course Architecture: The Global Journal of Golf Design and Development (Tudor Rose, February 25, 2014), <https://www.golfcoursearchitecture.net/content/municipal-courses-spreading-the-gospel-of-golf-for-over-a-century>), para. 4.

¹² Ibid., para. 5.

began in Scotland, it is the United States where the first truly municipal course was founded and where the democratization of golf first truly happened.

New York City's Van Cortlandt Park, opened in 1895¹³ holds the distinction of being the first municipal golf course and one of the early marks of golf being brought to the American masses. In the years that followed, municipal golf expanded throughout the country, providing publicly-accessible facilities to a growingly-eager American public¹⁴. Interestingly, these facilities were built with the intent of providing an amenity, rather than to provide the municipality with another source of revenue¹⁵. While the modern perspective about the purpose of a local government providing a golf course has changed, as "pressures to perform financially"¹⁶ have caused municipalities to question the viability of providing a facility, the role of municipal courses within the scope of golf as a whole has remained largely the same.

Today, municipal golf plays a large role in the health of the golf industry because it is "the way the vast, vast majority of people get introduced to the game"¹⁷. Thus, while also serving as another, generally less expensive option for established golfers, municipal golf is thought of as an avenue to bring more players into the game. Despite this clear "vital role"¹⁸ to attracting new

¹³ Ibid., para. 6.

¹⁴ As noted by Mark Frost in *The Greatest Game Ever Played*, the American interest in golf was largely triggered through visits from touring British professionals in the late-1890s, as well as Francis Ouimet's victory at the 1913 U.S. Open as an unheralded, local amateur.

¹⁵ Andy Staples, "The Community Links White Paper," Staples Golf Design, 2016, https://www.staplesgolfdesign.com/webres/file/community-links/The-Community-Links-White-Paper_2016_v1-7.pdf, 2.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ DJ Piehowski, interviewed by author, October 19, 2019.

players and thus further reinforcing the health of golf as a whole, municipal courses have a generally negative reputation. According to Michael McCartin, a golf course architect and expert on municipal golf, municipal courses carry a negative connotation, as it “conjures in the mind of a golfer images of ragged fairways and inexperienced hacks”¹⁹. Battling this negative perception is only one of the difficulties that municipal facilities must overcome. In addition to the problems presented by the unstable customer base that will be discussed in the forthcoming sections, today, golf is “more expensive to build and maintain than ever”²⁰ as a result, courses have struggled to stay open as municipalities find themselves losing increasing amounts of money²¹. Considering the negative view of municipal golf courses that inherently hinders their ability to market themselves as a legitimate option for establishing golfers, combined with their lack of financial success in their current iterations, questions regarding government investment in golf have begun to circulate as the theme of financial failure has become more prominent. Richard Karasek, a golf course owner in Jackson, Michigan, represented many of the critics as he voiced his concerns about this idea in a 2010 article titled, “Government’s role in owning golf courses a hot topic as industry struggles”, stating, “It’s something that needs to be debated: What do you want your government to do? There’s no reason for the government to be involved in

¹⁸ Tim Gavrich, “Is Municipal Golf The Best Way To Grow The Game?,” Golf Advisor, January 26, 2016, <https://www.golfadvisor.com/articles/is-municipal-golf-the-best-way-to-grow-the-game>), para. 7.

¹⁹ McCartin, *Making a Model*, 1.

²⁰ Lawrence, *Municipal Courses*, para. 7.

²¹ “Better Understanding Municipal Golf,” National Golf Foundation Quarterly (National Golf Foundation, June 2019))

golf. Stick to what you're supposed to be doing"²². Although Karasek's perspective may be biased due to his role as the owner of a competing business to a municipal course, his concerns are valid. Why should a municipality continue to invest in a golf course?

On the simplest level, and to the most fiscally-minded, one first has to look at the financial impact that golf has in the United States as possible justification for municipal investment. Regardless of one's opinion on the role of government in golf, it is a fact that golf is a lucrative business. It is an \$84.1 billion industry nationally and impacts nearly two million jobs²³. In addition to this, golf related investment impacts the home construction industry by approximately \$7 billion and golf tourists spend approximately \$26 billion annually²⁴. While these figures are impactful, they do not fully address the criticisms and doubts regarding government investment. For a private business, the size of the industry alone could warrant continuing investment in golf. While golf, like any other, is not a fail-safe industry, there is a massive amount of money that is associated with it and thus, investors in private facilities stand to make a large amount of money if their venture is successful. That being said, this does not fully answer Karasek's criticism regarding a government sticking "to what they should be doing". Instead, the path to answering this question, and that would also be useful in answering the critics of golf in general, lies in the possibility of a municipal facility providing more than

²² Gary Kalahar, "Government's Role in Owning Golf Courses a Hot Topic as Industry Struggles," M Live (Advance Local, January 21, 2019), https://www.mlive.com/sports/jackson/2010/12/governments_role_in_owning_gol.html, para. 18.

²³ "Economic Impact," We Are Golf (We Are Golf), accessed March 8, 2019, <http://wearegolf.org/economic-impact/#>

²⁴ Ibid.

just a revenue source. If the goal of a local government is to better the lives of people within the whole community, then municipal golf must provide the aforementioned common good that goes beyond the purely financial.

The unstable state of golf's participation since 2000 could be welcome news to some as criticism of municipal golf, and golf as a whole, is not a new phenomenon. To these critics, golf represents a harmful adherence to a tradition of exclusivity, elitism, and racism²⁵. Municipal golf is not alone as a publicly-funded institution with a history involving these negative components²⁶, however golf is different because it is not a necessity and traditionally benefits a small number of people. Those other institutions, for example public transportation, are more necessary and benefit far more people. Assuming that government investment should go toward programs that benefit the masses, rather than the few, golf's stained history, despite the opportunity to generate revenue, may make it difficult to justify investment. That being said, while golf has had a clear problem with exclusivist practices, *municipal* golf courses have also been on the forefront of combatting these issues and making the game more accessible to all.

Municipal courses represent a move towards greater equality in golf, thus presenting a direct response to the issue of elitism and exclusivity in the sport. Because they are "generally the least expensive option for golfers"²⁷, municipal courses inherently make the game more accessible to all. The cost of the sport is still high, as some estimates indicate that "the first year

²⁵ Ben Adler, "The Case against Golf," The Guardian (Guardian News & Media Limited, June 14, 2007), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/jun/14/thecaseagainstgolf>, para. 2

²⁶ City bus systems, for example, have a well-documented history with racism.

²⁷ McCartin, *Making a Model*, 1.

in the game can cost anywhere from \$832 to \$3,454 for juniors and \$1,849 to \$3,349 for adults”²⁸, however; by offering a lower priced option for playing, municipal courses at least provide the *option* for people from more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to get involved in golf. It is because of this that municipal golf can be thought of as being “the best tool”²⁹ for bringing golf to the masses. This is especially significant when considering that although “just over twenty six percent [of golfers] have a household income more than \$125,000”, nearly forty percent “have a household income under \$75,000”³⁰. This nearly forty percent, a significant portion of golfers, is who benefits from municipal courses and their ability to making the game more accessible.

While the relationship between municipal golf and elitism is addressed through its low pricing municipal courses, golf’s relationship with racism, and the municipal courses’ role in facing it, is more complicated. Golf, like all American sports, has had an unfortunate history with racism dating back to its inception in the United States. In 1939 “fewer than 20”³¹ of the 5,000 golf facilities in the country were open to African American golfers. This prejudice existed beyond the realm of individual course policy. It would take over twenty years for the Professional Golfers’ Association of America, the overarching organization whose members

²⁸ Jason Scott Deegan, “How Much Money Does It Cost to Introduce a Beginner to Golf?,” *Golf Advisor*, March 31, 2017, <https://www.golfadvisor.com/articles/how-much-money-does-it-cost-to-introduce-a-beginner-to-golf>), para 22.

²⁹ Lawrence, “Municipal Courses,” para. 1.

³⁰ Mike Stachura, “The NGF's Annual Golf Participation Report Uncovers Favorable Trends for the Game's Future,” *Golf Digest* (Discovery Golf, April 22, 2017), <https://www.golfdigest.com/story/the-ngf-annual-golf-participation-report-uncovers-favorable-trends-for-the-games-future>), para. 15.

³¹“African Americans and Golf, a Brief History,” African American Registry, accessed October 8, 2019, <https://aaregistry.org/story/african-americans-and-golf-a-brief-history/>), para. 8.

“work daily to grow interest and participation in the game of golf”³², to roll back its racist policy, finally admitting African American members in 1961³³. Throughout this period however, municipal courses, such as Langston Golf Course in Washington, D.C., combatted the racism that plagued a vast majority of courses throughout the country and allowed golf to grow in African American communities. In this way, municipal golf played a key role in breaking down the sport’s color barrier.

Langston Golf Course was founded in 1939 and, from its inception, represented a departure from the norms of golf culture in America. Named after John Mercer Langston, the “first African American elected into public office”³⁴, the course was the first in the nation’s capital to allow complete access to African Americans. Its equal access policy was rewarded as it “quickly became a popular course”³⁵. The success of Langston was then influential in *changing* the prejudicial policies at the city’s municipal courses. By 1941, all of the municipally owned courses in Washington, D.C. were desegregated³⁶.

This influence is vital to understanding why municipal golf courses hold such a valuable role in the overall realm of golf. Not only do these facilities provide access to people who are not financially able to join the private clubs with which golf is so often associated, but they can also

³² “About Us,” The PGA of America (The Professional Golfers' Association of America), accessed October 8, 2019, <https://www.pga.org/>

³³ “African Americans and Golf, A Brief History,” para. 2.

³⁴ “Langston Golf Course,” Golf DC, accessed October 8, 2019, <https://www.golfdc.com/langston-gc>), para. 1.

³⁵ “Langston Golf Course and Driving Range, African American Heritage Trail,” Cultural Tourism DC, October 8, 2019, <https://www.culturaltourismdc.org/portal/langston-golf-course-and-driving-range-african-american-heritage-trail>), para. 3.

³⁶ Ibid., para. 2.

serve as a catalyst for greater access for *all*. While many privately owned courses continued exclusivist practices long past the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, municipal courses like Langston Golf Course, were serving as models of accessibility. The result of this example is that it provides a response to those who feel that golf is not a worthy investment for municipalities because of the issues of race and economic equality. Not only is golf a significant and lucrative industry, municipal courses are an effective, and long-standing tool, at breaking down the class barriers associated with golf, a result of their generally inexpensive prices, and they can serve as a symbol and example of inclusivity in a game that is plagued with accusations of prejudice. While this still does not demonstrate the possibility for municipal courses to benefit non-golfers, it does provide a justification for why they are important within the realm of golf. Beyond the possible financial benefits of golf courses, and the role that municipal courses play in making the sport more accessible to those from diverse socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, there are benefits to golf and golf courses that make it a worthy investment for municipalities.

Justifying Municipal Investment through the Benefits of Golf

Golf courses provide green space to their communities and, especially in urban environments, green space provides underlying health benefits to residents. It is in this relationship, that the benefit to the non-golfing population is first evident. The link between green space and health has been highlighted in numerous studies including “Effects of Urban Green Space on Environmental Health, Equity and Resilience” a 2017 study published in *Nature-Based Solutions to Climate Change Adaptation in Urban Areas*. This study specifically highlighted that, while the modern urban lifestyle is “associated with chronic stress, insufficient physical activity and exposure to anthropogenic environmental hazards”³⁷, urban green space can aid in combatting these issues through four specific means. These means are “improved air quality”, “enhanced physical activity”, “stress compensation”, and “greater social cohesion”³⁸. The consequence of these benefits is that “cities that build and maintain well-connected, attractive green spaces are likely to have healthier, happier and more productive citizens with fewer demands for health services”³⁹. A separate study, titled “The health benefits of walking in greenspaces of high natural and heritage value”, resulted in similar conclusions that further reinforce the benefits of green space to general community members.

This study, published in the *Journal of Integrative Environmental Sciences*, provides complementary findings to those in “Effects of Urban Green Space on Environmental Health,

³⁷ Matthias Braubach et al., “Effects of Urban Green Space on Environmental Health, Equity and Resilience,” *Nature-Based Solutions to Climate Change Adaptation in Urban Areas*, September 2, 2017, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56091-5_11), para. 1.

³⁸ Ibid., para. 8.

³⁹ Ibid., para. 46.

Equity and Resilience”. While the latter focused on the long-term, macro-level benefits of green space, “The health benefits of walking in greenspaces of high natural and heritage value” focuses on the *combination* of the short-term and long-term benefits of spending time in green space. The study was aimed at “evaluating changes in self-esteem and mood” after spending time outdoors and concluded that “feelings of anger, depression, tension and confusion all significantly reduced”⁴⁰ after this time. If these effects are then maintained by frequent use of the greenspace, then the positive impacts can help address more long-term issues. While modern lifestyles are typically plagued by increasing amounts of sedentary behavior, stress, and mental health issues⁴¹, maintaining green space, specifically green space that can be used recreationally, can address these problems over time.

The implication of these studies is important when considering golf courses not just as a playing field for those who enjoy the game, but also as a benefit to the community as a whole. While a necessary component to this benefit is that course *must* be able to be utilized in part by the non-golfing population, if this requirement is fulfilled then having a golf course as a part of the community can clearly benefit many within it. In some ways, the green space provided by the course can function as a public health initiative. This is especially true if the course exists within an urban environment. While courses in less developed areas would not be as vital to maintaining green space, in cities, a golf course can serve the dual purpose of providing the health benefits of green space, while, if ran effectively and in line with the

⁴⁰ Jo Barton, Rachel Hine, and Jules Pretty, “The Health Benefits of Walking in Greenspaces of High Natural and Heritage Value,” *Journal of Integrative Environmental Sciences* 6, no. 4 (November 30, 2009), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/19438150903378425>), para. 1.

⁴¹ Ibid.

inclusive spirit of municipal courses, also provide the financial upside and greater access to the sport earlier highlighted.

Still, for some, this implication still may not justify municipal investment in golf. While the benefits of those studies *can* be applied to golf courses, they were not originally presented that way. Thus, one could argue that a municipality could obtain the same benefit for their general population by allowing their facility to overgrow and converting it into a general-use park. To address this criticism, one must consider the benefits that apply *specifically* to playing golf that then can only be provided to a community through having an accessible golf course available.

The benefits specifically of playing golf and having courses within a community can be categorized into two groups: health-related and economic. “A controlled trial of the health benefits of regular walking on a golf course” a clinical study from 2000 published in the American Journal of medicine is one resource that quantifies the health benefits of playing golf. The twenty-week study involved measuring different health metrics of “male golfers aged 48 to 64 years who had been sedentary during the seven months before the study”⁴² (Parkkari, et. al para, 2). During the twenty-week period, an “intervention group [was] encouraged to play golf two to three times a week”⁴³ (Parkkari, et. al para, 2), while the control group was not. What resulted from this study plays a key role in defining the health benefits to playing golf as the researchers concluded that “walking during a golf game was a practical and safe form of

⁴² Jari Parkkari et al., “A Controlled Trial of the Health Benefits of Regular Walking on a Golf Course,” *The American Journal of Medicine* 109, no. 2 (n.d.), [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/S0002-9343\(00\)00455-1](https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/S0002-9343(00)00455-1), para. 2.

⁴³ Ibid.

physical activity”⁴⁴ (Parkarri, et. al para, 3) and that walking while playing golf is “a good form of health-enhancing physical activity”⁴⁵ (Parkarri, et. al para, 4). Two additional studies then support this conclusion.

“The Benefits of Walking the Golf Course”, a 1990 study published in “The Physician and Sportsmedicine”, found that walking a golf course has positive impacts on one’s “total cholesterol (TC), high-density lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL-C), low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C) levels, and the ratio of TC to HDL-C”⁴⁶. By performing “lipoprotein analysis at the beginning and end of the golf season”, the study found that “golf lowers TC and LDL-C levels and improves risk ratios”⁴⁷, further supporting the idea that playing golf provides a clear health-benefit to participants.

“Health benefits of different sport disciplines for adults: systematic review of observational and intervention studies with meta-analysis” is the last of the selected studies that provides similar findings regarding golf’s health benefits. This 2015 study from the British Journal of Health Medicine, which was designed to “assess the quality and strength of evidence for the health benefits of specific sport disciplines”, concluded that golf specifically was shown to “shown to be associated with reduced all-cause mortality”⁴⁸. Different than the conclusion of

⁴⁴ Ibid., para. 3.

⁴⁵ Ibid., para. 4.

⁴⁶ Edward A Palank and Ernest H Hargreaves, “The Benefits of Walking the Golf Course,” *The Physician and Sportsmedicine* 18, no. 10 (n.d.), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/00913847.1990.11710155>), para. 1.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Pekka Oja et al., “Health Benefits of Different Sport Disciplines for Adults: Systematic Review of Observational and Intervention Studies with Meta-Analysis,” *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 49, no. 7 (January 7, 2015), <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2014-093885>), para. 31.

the first two studies, this did not just relate to walking while playing golf, but just general participation in the sport, a useful conclusion given the prevalence of golf carts in the United States.

The second type of golf-specific benefit to having a facility within a community involves positive local economic impact. In 2000, Dr. Mike Woods, an Oklahoma State professor with expertise in community economic analysis, published “Golf: Positive economic impacts for local economies”. Through studying a number of Oklahoma golf courses, Woods concluded that “golf courses definitely have a positive economic impact on local economies”⁴⁹ evidenced by different factors including “new jobs and payroll impacts”, as well as the spending from “visitors and golfers from out of town [that] can provide impacts both on the golf course and in the local community”⁵⁰. “Contribution of the Golf Industry to the Arizona Economy in 2014”, a University of Arizona report published in 2016, provides more updated analysis on the financial impact of courses. While the conclusions regarding job creation and visitor and golfer spending are similar, this study did provide additional insight into the link between golf courses and local economic impact by virtue of studying property values. The study found that courses “exert a positive effect on the value of residential real estate in their proximity”⁵¹. This means simply having a golf course that homes can be built near can then generate additional revenue for the

⁴⁹ Mike Woods, “Golf: Positive Economic Impacts for Local Economies,” *TurfGras Trends*, October 2000), 14.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Dari Duval et al. (The University of Arizona College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, December 2016), [https://cals.arizona.edu/arec/sites/cals.arizona.edu/arec/files/publications/AZ Golf Economic Contribution 2014.pdf](https://cals.arizona.edu/arec/sites/cals.arizona.edu/arec/files/publications/AZ%20Golf%20Economic%20Contribution%202014.pdf)), 7.

municipality via increased property taxes. These increased property taxes then provide additional funding to the local government, that without the course would not be available. This can then be used to benefit the whole community.

Given these benefits that golf provides to community members, golfers, and the local economy, along with their crucial role in making a lucrative sport more accessible to those from different economic and racial backgrounds, municipal investment in golf courses is justifiable. That being said, if their current iterations were successful, the need to reinvent their operational model would be nonexistent. Therein lies the problem. Golf's modern participation figures have been confusing and, for the most part, discouraging. This has resulted in an increasing number of financially failing courses in the last fifteen some-odd years. This combination of a stagnant industry and increasing rate of course closures acts as the catalyst for change. While not all municipal courses *need* to reinvent themselves, the macro-environment suggests that *some* may benefit from looking at possible changes. The forthcoming section discusses the state of golf participation and the reported causes for the sport's struggling popularity.

The State of Golf Participation and Industry Health since 2000

Paul Vitello broached the issue of golf's tumultuous journey since 2000 in his 2008 New York Times article "More Americans are Giving Up Golf". He noted that "the total number of people who play has declined or remained flat each year since 2000, dropping to about 26 million from 30 million, according to the National Golf Foundation (NGF) and the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association"⁵². Digging deeper into the participation data, another troubling statistic was also found as the number of "core players", "those who golf eight or more times a year"⁵³ and traditionally drive a vast majority of on-course traffic, dropped from 17.7 million in 2000 to 15 million in 2006⁵⁴. Interestingly, these negative participation trends were not widely recognized by those within the industry, a fact that would later prove to be harmful to the health of certain aspects of the industry.

One of these aspects that was hurt by the lack of recognition was the golf course construction business. Dylan Dethier, one of the guiding voices behind in the increasingly-digital golf media landscape, noted that "between 1990 and 2006, more than 4,500 golf courses were opened in the United States"⁵⁵. The cause of this boom, according to Dethier, was "the rise of

⁵² Paul Vitello, "More Americans Are Giving Up Golf," The New York Times, February 21, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/21/nyregion/21golf.html>), para. 7.

⁵³ Ibid., para. 9.

⁵⁴ Ryan Herrington, "National Golf Foundation Sees Signs of Encouragement in Latest Annual Participation Report," Golf Digest (Discovery Golf, May 17, 2018), <https://www.golfdigest.com/story/national-golf-foundation-sees-modest-signs-of-encouragement-in-latest-annual-participation-report>)

⁵⁵ Dylan Dethier, "The Little Golf Course ," The New York Times, August 15, 2017), para. 6.

Tiger Woods and a prerecession financial optimism”⁵⁶. The financial optimism was marked by increasing home ownership rates and with that, “new housing developments that [featured] golf courses”⁵⁷. Because of the strong linkage between course construction and home ownership, “when the housing market crashed in 2008, golf went with it”⁵⁸. Golf course construction, “especially high-end projects associated with real estate...came to a virtual halt when the economy collapsed in 2008”⁵⁹. This inherent link that Dethier notes between the overall health of the economy and the golf industry, on the surface, makes sense. Given the traditionally high expense of playing golf, if people have less money to spend, then a costly recreational activity could easily be the first thing to disappear from their budget. With this assumption however, would come a positive idea. If golf’s health is simply a reflection of the economy, then when the Great Recession ended, golf would *eventually* recover.

According to Federal Reserve Economic Data (FRED), the Real US GDP was \$15,761.967⁶⁰ billion directly before the Great Recession. Throughout the next 6 quarters, this figure continued to drop, bottoming out at \$15,134.117⁶¹ billion in the second quarter of 2009. The recessionary period from 2007-2009 coincided with the collapse of the golf course

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., para. 7.

⁵⁹ Keith Jarrett, “Why Are Fewer People Playing Golf?,” Citizen Times (USA Today, June 27, 2014), <https://www.citizen-times.com/story/sports/2014/06/27/fewer-people-playing-golf/11570839/>), para. 8.

⁶⁰ “Real Gross Domestic Product,” Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2019), <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/GDPC1>

⁶¹ Ibid.

construction industry, as noted by Dethier. From late 2009 through present day, the economy has recovered, as the Real GDP surpassed pre-Recessionary levels by the beginning of 2013⁶², and had risen to \$18,784.632 billion by the end of 2018⁶³. Interestingly though, in the years directly following the recovery, participation numbers continued to drop, challenging the notion that the health of the golf industry is always directly linked to economic growth. Instead, while it may be *influential*, there are other factors that influence golf's overall popularity.

In 2013, as the economy had at least partially recovered, golf continued to experience the negative participation trends that had been existent since 2000. According to the NGF, “4.1 million golfers quit the game”⁶⁴. Drew Harwell, a Washington Post writer, noted the continuing fall in golf participation in his 2015 article, “Why America fell out of love with Golf”. He affirmed that, despite the economic turnaround, golf continued to struggle to attract and retain players, specifically young ones whose participation dropped “nearly 35%”⁶⁵ between 2003 and 2013. The overall downtrend is perhaps best put into context when looking at the sales figure of Taylormade-Adidas golf, at the time one of the titans of the golf equipment and apparel industry. In 2014 the company saw a 28% decline in sales⁶⁶. Herbert Hainer, the Chief Executive Officer of Adidas at the time, pointed out that the reason for the decline in sales was nothing to do with

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Jarrett, “Why Are Fewer People Playing Golf?”, para. 5.

⁶⁵ Drew Harwell, “Why America Fell out of Love with Golf,” *The Washington Post*, March 5, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/03/05/why-america-fell-out-of-love-with-golf/?noredirect=on>), para. 9.

⁶⁶ Ibid., para. 2.

the company itself, but instead a result of the industry as a whole stating, “A decline in the number of active players ... caused immense problems in the entire industry, and as a market leader, this hit us particularly hard”⁶⁷.

2013, from an industry strength standpoint, was the low point of golf since 2000. Despite economic recovery, golf suffered mightily. Luckily, in the years since 2013, participation in the game has seen more neutral to positive trends.

According to the most recent surveys conducted by the National Golf Foundation (NGF), “a community of individuals and golf businesses committed to being the most well-informed advocates for the growth of the industry”⁶⁸ who undertake an annual Golf Participation Survey that aids in informing organizations within the golf industry about the number and types of players throughout the United States, there are 33.5 million Americans who play golf either on-course or an off-course facility, such as a driving range⁶⁹. This is particularly noteworthy, when considering, in 2018, that this figure increased year over year for the first time in fourteen years⁷⁰. An estimated 600,000 more people also played an actual course from 2017 to 2018⁷¹. An increase to the amount of beginners may have been one cause for this jump in on-course

⁶⁷ Ibid., para. 6.

⁶⁸ “About NGF,” National Golf Foundation, 2019, <https://www.ngf.org/who-we-are/>), para. 1.

⁶⁹ “Golf Research and Industry Data,” National Golf Foundation, 2019, <https://www.ngf.org/golf-industry-research/>)

⁷⁰ Mike Stachura, “This Might Be the Most Encouraging News about Golf Participation in a Decade,” Golf Digest (Discovery Golf, July 1, 2019), <https://www.golfdigest.com/story/ngf-report-number-of-on-course-golfers-up-along-with-10-percent-jump-in-driving-range-and-non-traditional-golf>)

⁷¹ Ibid.

participation as the 2.6 million players in that group represent a “near historical [high]”⁷². While these figures signal that golf has begun a recovery, there are still questions to be answered about other facets of the game’s participation levels, and thus the future of the industry.

While the NGF asserts that golf is *growingly* diverse, the actual figures do not necessarily support this. Twenty three percent of all golfers today are women, up from figures in the early 2000s, but, recently only stable to slightly down, as in 2017, twenty four percent were women⁷³. The number of junior players, who represent crucial subset of golfers as the Baby Boomer generation decrease, follows suit with this slightly negative trend in recent years. While in 2016, as the golf media began a turn towards positivity about the vitality of the game, there were 2.9 million junior players⁷⁴, this number decreased nearly seven percent in 2017 to 2.7 million⁷⁵. This negative trend then continued into 2018 as the number of juniors decreased nearly seven and a half percent to approximately 2.5 million⁷⁶. While the number of girls who are part of the junior population has slightly increased from 2016 to 2018, then at approximately thirty three percent⁷⁷ and now at approximately thirty six percent⁷⁸, the number of minorities in the junior

⁷² Ibid, para. 3.

⁷³ “Golf Research and Industry Data 2019.”

⁷⁴ Stachura, “Favorable Trends.”

⁷⁵ “Golf Research and Industry Data,” National Golf Foundation, 2018, <https://www.ngf.org/golf-industry-research/>

⁷⁶ “Golf Research and Industry Data 2019.”

⁷⁷ Stachura, “Favorable Trends.”

⁷⁸ “Golf Research and Industry Data 2018.”

population has fallen. In 2017, twenty seven percent of juniors were non-Caucasian⁷⁹, while in 2018, slightly less than twenty five percent fit this demographic⁸⁰. Isolated, the slight decreases in women and junior participation, is not entirely concerning, however when coupled with the amount of rounds played and facilities operating, the difficulties for golf courses to remain operational, whether privately or municipally-owned, becomes easier to understand.

For context, when golf was at its low point in 2013, when 4.1 million players left the game, a net of 152 courses closed⁸¹. Because golf was losing popularity, courses closing to match that decrease in demand makes sense. However, given that in the years since 2013, the overall participation in golf has stabilized, then one would assume that the course supply would likely begin to stabilize as well. This has not been the case though, as in 2017, a net 190 courses closed⁸² and in 2018 another 181 courses closed⁸³. Over this time period, and extending back over a decade since golf began to experience a decline, municipal golf courses were specifically impacted by this trend as seven percent of the total amount of municipal golf courses in the United States have closed⁸⁴. While this may be market correction, as the number of golf courses likely over-expanded in the age of home-development courses, this is not necessarily a satisfying answer when combined with the figures for the number of rounds played.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ “Golf Research and Industry Data 2019.”

⁸¹ Jarrett, “Why Are Fewer People Playing Golf?”, para. 5.

⁸² Herrington, “Signs of Encouragement.”

⁸³ “Golf Research and Industry Data 2018.”

⁸⁴ Reitman, “Risk”. para 9.

In 2016, Americans played 469 million rounds of golf⁸⁵, in 2017, this number fell to 456 million rounds⁸⁶, and in 2018 it fell once again to 434 million⁸⁷. The total decline in those two years of slightly under seven and a half percent, combined with the fact that the average golfer is playing approximately ten percent less rounds in a given year over that same timespan, hints at a larger issue for courses, going beyond market correction. If the reason for courses closing was just an over-supply, then the number of rounds should stay approximately constant. Instead, while the number of courses continues to decrease, so too does the actual amount of play, signaling that the game may also be less appealing to its customer base and thus less popular.

Harwell points to three main causes for the decline in popularity: cost, difficulty, and the length of time it takes to play. He states that, “the game -- with its drivers, clubs, shoes and tee times -- is expensive both to prepare for and to play. It's difficult, dissuading amateurs from giving it a swing, and time-consuming, limiting how much fans can play”⁸⁸. The idea of the amount of time is especially interesting when comparing the amount of time it takes to play a round of golf with the amount of time that an average American spends on recreational activities. While a full round of golf consistently takes upwards of four hours⁸⁹, the average American only spends .27 hours (16.2 minutes) per weekday .36 hours (21.6 minutes) per weekend day and

⁸⁵ Herrington, “Signs of Encouragement.”

⁸⁶ “Golf Research and Industry Data 2018.”

⁸⁷ “Golf Research and Industry Data 2019.”

⁸⁸ Harwell, “Out of Love”, para. 6.

⁸⁹ Matthew Fortuna, “How Long Does It Take to Golf 18 Holes?,” Golf Link, accessed November 3, 2019, https://www.golflink.com/facts_4799_how-long-does-golf-holes.html)

holiday on sports, exercise, and recreation activities⁹⁰. This vast difference, demonstrates the real threat that Americans' typical use of time has on golf's long term viability.

Harwell's view on the issues with golf is not alone. Instead, industry insiders and media members have widely reported similar views. DJ Piehowski, of the popular media outlet No Laying Up, described time as being one of the most threatening factors to golf's existence⁹¹, while Brad Tuttle, a columnist for Money.com, also pointed to cost and difficulty, on the latter stating "golf is renowned not only for being frustratingly difficult for beginners, but even longtime players 'enjoy' it as a frustratingly difficult hobby"⁹². John Paul Newport, a Washington Post golf columnist agreed with this notion, telling a National Public Radio podcast in 2014 that "the deep appeal of golf, once you get hooked, is that it's difficult"⁹³. Michael McCartin summarizes the issues succinctly stating that "for most people golf is too hard, takes too long, and costs too much"⁹⁴.

The end result of this analysis is a picture of golf's health that is complicated. While it is currently not experiencing the type of mass exodus that it did in the early-2010s, it is also not thriving. On-course participation, the end determinant of financial success for a course, is slightly down, and although there are isolated trends of growing diversity, that is not necessarily

⁹⁰ "American Time Use Survey Summary," Bureau of Labor Statistics (United States Department of Labor, June 19, 2019), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.nr0.htm>)

⁹¹ DJ Piehowski, interviewed by author, October 19, 2019.

⁹² Brad Tuttle, "Fore! No, Make That Five! 5 Reasons Golf Is in a Hole," Money (Meredith Corporation, June 13, 2014), <http://money.com/money/2871511/golf-dying-tiger-woods-elitist/>), para. 11.

⁹³ National Public Radio, *National Public Radio*, May 11, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/05/11/311521535/stress-free-golf-with-holes-the-size-of-a-pizza>)

⁹⁴ Michael McCartin, interviewed by author, March 3, 2019.

true for every facet of the golfing public. Beyond the historical issues with golf from an accessibility and exclusivity standpoint, there are present-day problems that threaten courses. These threats have materialized in courses closing and less rounds being played on the ones that remain open. Municipal courses, which play a crucial role in mitigating the issue of exclusion and also play the largest role in growing the game of golf, and thus making it more viable in the long-term, are no exception to these issues. Municipal courses, by virtue of the larger problems with golf's participation, have a reason to look outward and consider reinvention. These reasons exist on the micro and macro levels.

The benefit to investigating a new way of doing business for an *individual* municipal golf course is that, if done in a way that has demonstrated success, it may become more profitable and provide more of a common good. For the golf industry *as a whole*, revitalizing municipal golf courses, which for so many act as an inclusive, accessible option to begin playing the game, may buck the stagnant participation trends. In a way, golf's problems may be partially fixed simply by reconsidering the product that municipal courses present. If municipal courses can provide a more compelling product, rooted in the idea of accessibility and providing a benefit to the community as a whole, thus allowing it to be fully embraced by a larger subset of the local population, then the game as a whole, as well as the individual courses, will benefit.

Winter Park Golf Course provides evidence behind this claim and can be used as a roadmap for communities interested in this investment opportunity at their courses. The renovation at the nine-hole municipal course serves as a successful realization of the goal of trying to provide a course that follows in the municipal golf tradition of accessibility, provides a facility that benefits both golfers and non-golfers within the population, and is financially

successful. The lessons learned from Winter Park represent the options that municipalities have when faced with a struggling golf course.

A Case Study in Quality Architecture and Community Emphasis at Winter Park Golf Course



Photo Courtesy: Keith Rhebb

In 2014 Winter Park Country Club found itself at a crossroads. The nine-hole municipal course had been a mainstay in the Winter Park, Florida community for 100 years, but like the seven percent of municipal courses that have closed since 2007, dwindling rounds left the course struggling to stay afloat. While other municipalities have abandoned these failing entities, closing and selling them off to land developers, the City of Winter Park took a proactive, and *pro-golf*, approach that can serve as a model of how courses lacking in land, pedigree, and/or resources can revitalize their business and provide a common good to golfers and non-golfers alike.

While the story of Winter Park Country Club revolves around a floundering golf course, understanding Winter Park as a community is essential to gaining context on the municipality's situation. Founded as a resort community for northern businessmen in the late 1800s, Winter Park, Florida is a prototypical suburb of a major metropolitan area. The city is located six miles north of Orlando, Florida in Orange County and is home today to a slowly growing, upper-

middle class population of 29,922 people⁹⁵. The city occupies 10.17 square miles and has a SunRail, Orlando's commuter rail system, station in the city's historic city center, positioning itself as a haven for people who work in Orlando and commute into the city⁹⁶. The historic city center is itself an example of what the city as a whole strives to be. It prides itself on being a "city of arts and culture, cherishing its traditional scale and charm while building a healthy and sustainable future for all generations"⁹⁷ and is home to a mixture of restaurants, museums, parks, and small businesses that reflect these values. While these businesses and recreational activities attract some tourism, Winter Park is still far from the seasonal community that it was when it was established. Instead, a flourishing, growingly affluent population has made Winter Park their home. This is evidenced by the rising median household income in the city that is above both national and county averages. From 2013 to 2017, the median household income in Winter Park rose from \$57,545 to \$68,078, an 18.3% jump, while Orange County's median income only increased from \$47,581 to \$51,586 (+8.4%) and the national median household income only increased from \$53,046 to \$57,652 (+8.6%)⁹⁸. Related to Winter Park's affluent population is a high median property value of \$371,300⁹⁹, almost double the national median of \$193,500¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁵ "Living in Winter Park, FL," Area Vibes, accessed June 3, 2019, <https://www.areavibes.com/winter-park-fl/livability/#amenities-jmp>)

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ "Arts & Culture- City of Winter Park," City of Winter Park, FL, 2019, <https://cityofwinterpark.org/visitors/arts-culture/>), para. 1.

⁹⁸ "Winter Park, Florida," Data USA (Deloitte, 2019), <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/winter-park-fl>)

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Coinciding with both the rising median household income and property values in Winter Park, the population is also slightly older than the state and national medians as Winter Park's median age is 43.4, while Florida's and the United States' are 41.6 and 37.7¹⁰¹, respectively.

The resulting picture provided by these statistics is that of a city that is on the surface, ripe for golf. The increasingly affluent, home-owning, older population fits golf's general demographic and, in theory should provide a perfect market for the city's course to target. Even before the increases to the key statistics related to wealth and age, Winter Park's population was still ideal for a golf course, yet the city's did not thrive. There were a number of factors that contributed to Winter Park Country Club's diminishing financial state. Ultimately, an underwhelming product failed to allow for the course to capitalize on the seemingly ideal local market.

Mayor of Winter Park, Steve Leary, was instrumental in the decision to reinvest in the failing course. Despite the fact that the golf course had transformed into a "local eye sore"¹⁰² by 2016, he remained optimistic, believing that it was an "asset" that needed to be kept "for future generations"¹⁰³. What transpired as a result of this optimism has been called "a blueprint for other municipalities to copy or draft from"¹⁰⁴. Under the direction of the "relatively unknown architect duo of Riley Johns and Keith Rhebb"¹⁰⁵, the course was closed for a complete

¹⁰¹ "Living in Winter Park, FL."

¹⁰² Rick Young, "Winter Park's Success Story: Part I," SCOREGolf, March 24, 2019, <https://scoregolf.com/blog/rick-young/winter-parks-success-story/>), para. 20.

¹⁰³ Ibid., para. 26.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., para. 13.

¹⁰⁵ Andy Johnson, "Municipal Golf of the Future: Winter Park 9," The Fried Egg, February 20, 2017, <https://thefriedegg.com/winter-park-golf-course/>), para. 5.

renovation from April 1, 2016 through October 1, 2016, before being reopened to acclaim. The newly named Winter Park Golf Course (or WP9) now stands as an example that “municipalities facing similar situations with a public course asset and tight budget have options”¹⁰⁶ in terms of both bettering their financial position, while also revitalizing a seemingly dying facility.

¹⁰⁶ Young, “Part I”, para. 30.

The State of Winter Park Before the Renovation



*The par four first hole prior to the renovation. Note the poor turf quality.
Photo Courtesy: Keith Rhebb*

Within the city of Winter Park, the nine-hole golf course sits on a 40-acre plot of land near the aforementioned historic city center, crossing cobblestone streets and lying adjacent to the SunRail train tracks. While not the isolated oasis that much of the modern American golfing population has come to associate with well-regarded course, the course's setting and nine-hole layout *should* have allowed for it to function as a quick, convenient option for local golfers looking to play “a quick relaxed round”¹⁰⁷. Prior to Johns' and Rhebb's renovation however, a decreasing amount of people took advantage of this opportunity to golf within the confines of their limited free time. While some of the decreasing rounds leading up to the 2016 renovation

¹⁰⁷ Johnson, “Winter Park 9”, para. 3.

may be chalked up to the growing apathy with golf, highlighted in the previous sections, course-specific factors also played key roles in the course's increasingly bleak state.

Appearance and playability issues were the first of these factors. The condition of the course's fairways were so poor that one regular patron remarked that, prior to the renovation, if a player hit a ball in the fairway "it [didn't] really make any difference" because they were "so bad and so worn out"¹⁰⁸. The main reason for the poorly conditioned fairways was turf disease brought upon by "up to a foot of thatch"¹⁰⁹. While thatch, "a tightly intermingled layer of dead and living parts... that develops between green vegetation and soil surface"¹¹⁰ is not necessarily always an issue, as limited amounts "[help] the soil to retain moisture, the turf to resist wear, and provides resiliency in the sod"¹¹¹, the amount that had built up through years of questionable maintenance at the course was extremely problematic. Beyond the fairways, too many trees that had been allowed to overgrow caused turf issues on the greens because of a lack of "air flow and sun angles"¹¹², further hurting the course's appearance as well as playability. While there are examples of municipal courses being financially successful despite poor playing conditions, as Bethpage State Park's Black Course attracted high amounts of play from the 1970s through the

¹⁰⁸ Jessica Inman, "Winter Park Golf Course Gets Makeover after over 100 Years," Orlando Sentinel, March 1, 2016, <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-winter-park-golf-course-groundbreaking-20160229-story.html>), para. 9.

¹⁰⁹ Young, "Part I", para. 25.

¹¹⁰ Stanley J Zontek, "Answering the Most-Asked Questions About Thatch," *USGA Green Section Record*, 1986), 5.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Young, "Part I", para. 25.

1990s despite being “in shambles by modern conditioning standards”¹¹³, prior to the renovation, Winter Park had no such luck.

One key difference between Bethpage and Winter Park was the quality of the design of each course. Bethpage’s design featured “high quality” architecture¹¹⁴, which allowed the course to “maintain its attractiveness and profitability despite years of neglect and terrible conditioning”¹¹⁵. Winter Park’s course, on the other hand, lacked this quality prior to Johns’ and Rhebb’s work. When the pair of architects arrived on site to survey the property and begin the planning of their renovation, Rhebb reported the following:

The bunkers are now two or three feet above grade, because of all the sand that has been put in them over time. The greens have shrunk, as is normal on older courses – in fact there is a bunker on the ninth hole that is almost twenty feet away from the rear of the putting surface. The greens are just push ups, and the holes are basically devoid of strategy.¹¹⁶

This report from Rhebb was telling of the uphill battle that the duo would face going forward and helps explain why the course found itself in a financially failing position. While the macro-trend of stagnant golf participation and the fact that nine hole courses are generally less desirable to committed golfers both provided no help to the city’s problem, the course itself was

¹¹³ McCartin, *Making a Model*, 69.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 70.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 90.

¹¹⁶ Adam Lawrence, “Keith Rhebb and Riley Johns to Lead Renovation of Florida Muni,” *” Golf Course Architecture: The Global Journal of Golf Design and Development* (Tudor Rose, November 19, 2015), <https://www.golfcoursearchitecture.net/content/keith-rhebb-and-riley-johns-to-lead-renovation-of-florida-muni>), para. 3.

deeply flawed and, despite being inexpensively priced to remain accessible, failed to present a fully compelling product to its customers. Regardless of the attractiveness of a given course's local market, which is typically the lifeblood for municipal courses, if that course is not well conditioned or compelling to play, the result of well-executed architecture, then the course is doomed to fail. In the years leading up to the renovation, Winter Park was a poster child for this phenomena as, in fiscal year 2015 (October 1, 2014-September 30, 2015), the course only made \$406,535.64¹¹⁷ in revenue, leading to an estimated loss of between \$150,000-\$200,000¹¹⁸.

Because of this financial loss, which had grown to be a constant reality of the course rather than an anomaly, the city was forced to subsidize operations using government money. This negative economic impact, which had become more than strictly a golf-course issue and had leaked into the community as a whole, is what eventually led Leary and a local task force to release a Request for Proposal on how to better the course and make it financially successful. Leary's attitude and commitment to keeping the course in this instance was vital. Other municipalities throughout the country have faced a similar situation and have abandoned their courses, Leary's attitude, on the other hand, set in motion the transformation and demonstrates a key reason for Winter Park's success that goes beyond the product they offer to the community. A supportive local government is necessary, and in this case, allowed the course to be saved.

¹¹⁷ "Month-by-Month Breakdown of Revenue for Winter Park, FL's Municipal Golf Course for FY 2015" (Winter Park, FL, 2015))

¹¹⁸ Young, "Part I", para. 19.



Riley Johns, left, world-renowned architect Bill Coore, center, and Keith Rhebb, right, on site during the construction of the new Winter Park Golf Course.

Photo Courtesy: Keith Rhebb

Before the success of the renovation, however, the task force had to make a decision regarding what design firm to hire. The “extensive and competitive”¹¹⁹ bid process eventually led the city to settling on Johns and Rhebb. While the background of both architects was attractive on its own, as Johns had spent time working for Tom Doak’s Renaissance Golf Design team and

¹¹⁹ Johnson, “Winter Park 9”, para. 5.

Bill Coore¹²⁰, while Rhebb was “a long-time Coore and Crenshaw associate”¹²¹, both had yet to do solo work. This lack of individual experience placed them at a disadvantage compared to other firms who were competing for this work. Although the course construction industry has slightly recovered from the rock-bottom point that coincided with the Great Recession, landing contracts for renovations remains extremely competitive because of the fact that the “largest current source of U.S. golf course development [work] is renovations rather than new construction”¹²². The firms that have traditionally relied on building new courses to generate revenue, have, since 2009, been forced to also compete for renovation work. Despite this issue and the pair’s inexperience, the duo was able to separate themselves from other firms with their succinct and innovative vision for the course. Instead of pitching a facility whose sole purpose was to serve golfers, Johns and Rhebb aimed to create a course that was beneficial to both golfers and non-golfers within the community. They stated, “This isn’t a golf course; it’s a community park with pin flags”¹²³. This vision ultimately landed them the contract, and the pair began their work, armed with a meager \$1.2 million budget¹²⁴.

¹²⁰ “Riley Johns- Integrative Golf Design,” Integrative Golf Design, 2019, <https://integrativegolfdesigns.com/riley-johns>)

¹²¹ Lawrence, “Keith Rhebb and Riley Johns”, para. 2.

¹²² Herrington, “Signs of Encouragement”, para. 10.

¹²³ Young, “Part I”, para. 8.

¹²⁴ Ibid., para. 4.

The Result of Winter Park's Renovation



*The renovated green complex at the par five third hole.
Photo Courtesy: Keith Rhebb*

The course reopened to the public on October 2, 2016¹²⁵, a mere seven months after breaking ground. Rebranded from Winter Park Country Club to Winter Park Golf Course, or WP9 for short, the end result was a vast improvement over the poorly conditioned and designed course that had become a burden to the city in the years prior to the renovation. Aided by the fact that Johns and Rhebb did much of the physical shaping themselves¹²⁶ the budgeted \$1.2 million

¹²⁵ Sean Dudley, “Winter Park Golf Course to Reopen This October Following Renovation Work,” *Golf Course Architecture: The Global Journal of Golf Design and Development* (Tudor Rose, September 7, 2016), <https://www.golfcoursearchitecture.net/content/winter-park-golf-course-to-reopen-this-october-following-renovation-work>)

¹²⁶ Lawrence, “Keith Rhebb and Riley Johns”, para. 4.

was able to cover numerous significant changes. To mitigate the air flow and sun issues, and increase width through the course “around 100 trees were removed...and around 100 native trees [were] replanted in better locations”¹²⁷ To improve turf conditions throughout the rest of the course, Johns and Rhebb removed the “thatch that had developed over time and exposed the free draining sand underneath”¹²⁸. By reintroducing the sand as a drainage technique, Rhebb and Johns effectively saved money by not having to invest in “unnecessary drainage infrastructure”¹²⁹. To keep the course in playable condition throughout both the cool winters and hot summers, a new irrigation system was added and multifaceted grasses¹³⁰ were selected for the fairways and greens¹³¹. While these practical conditioning elements were a component to the new course, Johns and Rhebb focus on enhancing the course’s architecture was also a point of emphasis.

WP9’s new architecture can be summarized as being playable, but engaging. The playability of the course is a result of the “wide fairways”¹³², relatively open avenues provided in order to get to the greens, and short yardage, with the layout totaling 2,559 yards with a par of 35. A result of this playability is that rounds are able to be played quicker, effectively neutralizing the looming threat of the amount of time it takes to play. The engaging aspect of the

¹²⁷ Dudley, “Reopen This October”, para. 11.

¹²⁸ Ibid., para. 12.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ These new grasses were TifEagle and TifWay 419.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Johnson, “Winter Park 9”, para. 13.

design is the result of well-placed hazards and intricate green complexes. The result of this mix is that players of all different skill levels can enjoy the course, effectively widening its target market. Piehowski, who frequented the course prior to the renovation and has since produced content on the new iteration, spoke to this idea of approachability in the design stating the following:

If you've never picked up a club before, [WP9] is a great place to learn because there are no forced carries or water hazards. You could theoretically play the whole course with a putter if you wanted to. But at the same time, the greens are so challenging that, to a low handicap player, it really matters whether you're on the proper side of the fairway or green if you want to go low. Every hole is truly an easy par and a difficult birdie which makes it engaging for better players.¹³³



¹³³ DJ Piehowski, interviewed by author, October 19, 2019.

*Illustration of the par five fourth hole.
Illustration Courtesy: Keith Rhebb and Riley Johns*

To further illustrate this principle of the mixture of playability and engagement take into consideration the 505-yard par five fourth hole, which perfectly demonstrates this interplay.



*The bunker guarding the inside of the dogleg at the par five fourth hole, with out of bounds looming to the left.
Photo Courtesy: Keith Rhebb*

This hole is a classic risk, reward design that gives players of different skill levels options on every shot they may hit. Off the tee is the first place this decision-making comes into play. For the skilled player, the strategically-placed fairway bunker at the inside of the dogleg is an approximately 250 yard carry. Short enough to entice the better player to play aggressively and aim over the bunker, but long enough to where a poorly struck shot could find it and hurt the player. To further challenge the highly skilled player off the tee, to the left of the bunker is out of bounds, meaning that, even if the player does have the distance to cover the hazard, if they go off line too far, or if they are a particularly long hitter and get too greedy while attempting to cut too

much yardage off at the corner, they may be even further penalized. Whereas hitting it in the bunker would theoretically only stop the highly skilled player from trying to hit the green in two shots, effectively eliminating any chance at eagle and severely reducing their chance at a birdie, hitting the ball out of bounds, which then carries a stroke-and-distance penalty, would be even more costly and bring higher scores into play. If the highly skilled player chooses not to attempt this route, they reduce the chance of making a high score because of hitting the ball out of bounds, but they also are left with a much longer shot into the green. While hitting it over the bunker would leave a shot of 190 or less into the green, playing the tee shot out to the right leaves a shot of 215 yards or more into the green, making it more difficult to hit the green in two shots and limiting the chances of eagle and birdie. This option out to the right leads to the options off the tee for the novice player.

For a less skilled player who may struggle with distance and/or accuracy, the width of the hole allows for the player to keep the ball in play. If they are long enough to reach the bunker, which begins approximately 220 yards from the tee, then they can choose to play away from it, or to play a shorter shot that cannot reach the bunker. Additionally, because there is no forced carry on the hole, meaning that even a shot which just rolls along the ground can be played, and because the playing corridor is approximately forty-five yards wide, entirely composed of fairway, even poor shots should remain playable and with a decent lie. The absence of rough and width of the hole effectively allows less skilled players to be able to experience the course. These principles remain true for shots approaching the green as well.



*The bunkers guarding the entrance to the fourth hole.
Photo Courtesy: Keith Rhebb*

On shots approaching the green players have a decision to make as a result of the bunkers flanking either side of the fairway approximately sixty-five (left) and fifty yards (right) from the green. The player must decide whether to lay back of the bunkers or try to hit it beyond them. Much like the tee shot, the lack of rough, and generally open corridor into the green would allow even the most novice player to play conservatively, keep the ball along the ground, and continue to make progress down the hole. While this may not be the play from those who play frequently and have the ability to always get their ball airborne, this option does demonstrate one of the values of this type of design. Even the least skilled player, who can seldom get the ball off the ground, can play the course, and play it with limited risk of losing a ball. Skilled players out of position after their tee shot or novice players wanting to keep their ball out of the sand both have the option to lay back from the two flanking bunkers. The result of this safe decision, is less risk on this shot and a relatively easy shot, from approximately eighty yards, remaining to a severely

sloping green. While this decision may not work for every type of player, for those who do not want to assume the risk of attempting to hit the green from, at a minimum, 170 yards¹³⁴ or fear their ball may end up in either bunker, this does provide the option to take an extremely bad score out of play. Although this play effectively eliminates any chance at an eagle, and lessens the chance of a birdie, it does take the dreaded “big number” out of play. Like the tee shot however, the more aggressive, highly skilled player ultimately does have the option to attempt to carry these two bunkers and get their ball onto the green.

The ingenuity behind this particular hole’s design, and that is evident throughout the rest of course in the “undulating and thoughtful green complexes that dictate strategy and provide plentiful options”¹³⁵, is that, even though the skilled player may have a short or mid-iron left into this green, that does not guarantee success. Instead, the contours on and around the around the green effectively repel errant shots away. This is especially true on the back right side of the green, where players who had taken the aggressive line of play off the tee risk hitting their ball if they misjudge the distance of their shot. Not only will these players have to carry to two flanking bunkers well short of the green, but they must also avoid the greenside bunkers. The aggressive, skilled player is forced to make a conscious swing on their shot into the green after already executing a difficult shot off of the tee, in order to have a chance at eagle or an easy birdie by hitting the green, assuming it is their second shot. These options that physically and mentally

¹³⁴ 170 is approximately the least yardage a skilled player would have into the green if they take the most aggressive line of play on their tee shot and receive a large bounce upon carrying the bunker at the corner.

¹³⁵ Johnson, “Winter Park 9”, para. 6.

challenge skilled players, while also allowing more novice ones to play and enjoy their time, can also be observed around the green.

While the bunkers around the green on this specific hole may challenge novice players, in general, Rhebb and Johns used restraint when adding bunkers to the design. Despite the fact that the pair hired “bunker specialist Blake Conant” to sculpt the “beautiful bunkering”¹³⁶, Rhebb and Johns ultimately chose to place bunkers strategically around the course, rather than inundating the design with useless sand. The result is bunkers that challenge skilled players but that can be avoided if need be by novice players. The bunkering around the fourth green serves as an example of this concept. While the bunkers on either side of the green may catch errant, aggressive shots, they can be avoided if the player plays conservatively to the short and right portion of the green and surrounding fairway. Depending on what number shot is hit to this area, this may eliminate a birdie or par, but it does allow players fearful of bunkers to eliminate the chance of having to confront one. The rest of the green surrounds, as well as the green itself, demonstrate the final aspect of the playable, yet engaging design of this hole, and by virtue of this hole being consistent with the rest of the design, the entire layout.

Although the green and green complex are extremely contoured, because there is no rough on the surrounding edges, the hole allows for novice players to avoid having to play delicate chip shots from around the green, instead being able to opt with a putter. It may still be extremely challenging to get the ball close to the hole with a putter from a long distance away, it does eliminate the opportunity to badly misplay a riskier chip shot from the difficult, short grass lies around the green. Much like playing the tee shot right or short of the fairway bunker, laying up short of the two bunkers on a longer approach shot, or playing to the open front, right side of

¹³⁶ Ibid., para. 13.

the green on a shorter approach shot, this option to putt from around the green is beneficial to the novice player who struggles with more advanced shots or to more skilled players who are avoiding risk-laden options. The short grass around the green, in addition to helping the more novice player, also effectively challenges the more skilled one.

While making the skilled player who has missed this green choose between a number of different short game shots is a challenge in and of itself, this is not the entire problem that the closely mown green surrounds present. Offline shots, which on most courses in the United States would settle close to the green because of the rough that surrounds them, are repelled further away from the green, in the process making the resulting shots harder for the skilled player. While they do have the option to simply putt the ball up and onto the green, depending on hole position, the play that gives them the better chance at a good score often lies in trying to hit a lower-percentage, more precise chip shot. The way that WP9 has chosen to mow their green surrounds, combined with the wildly contouring green itself, is extremely effective in truly making the holes engaging for skilled players, while playable for even the most novice ones from tee to green. Well-contoured greens, more so than penal features from tee to green, can be viewed as the great equalizer, bringing the novice and skilled player to the same level. As Andy Johnson, owner of *The Fried Egg*, an architecture-centric golf website, has observed in his study of course design, “On and around putting surfaces, physical limitations are moot. Any golfer, of any size or strength or technique, stands a chance”¹³⁷.

The emphasis on strategic design, demonstrated tee to green by the fourth hole and serving as a microcosm of the entire course’s architecture, in addition to the heightened playing

¹³⁷ Andy Johnson, “Wild Harry Smead: Pine Hills,” *The Fried Egg*, November 13, 2019, <https://thefriedegg.com/pine-hills-country-club-review/>), para. 16.

conditions and aesthetics of the course, are crucial aspects to the renovation at Winter Park Golf Course. That being said, they are not the only aspects to the renovation. Instead there are equally as important ones that must be highlighted. While Johns and Rhebb's work serves as a valuable example of how far a small budget and well-educated architects can take a layout from the architectural and agronomic perspective, this may not be an option for every course. Although \$1.2 million is a small amount of money in the world of golf course construction, in the more expansive world of municipal investment, a full-scale renovation may not be an option. Instead, although the redesigned course does provide a tangible example of how course design can reinforce the idea of accessibility, as the architecture used at Winter Park is non-discriminatory in the type of player that can play and enjoy their experience on the course, it is only part of the full story of the facility. The physical course plays a key role in providing a compelling and accessible product, but the fully realized goal of accessibility and profitability is also a function of the different groups, events, and initiatives undertaken by the course.

Winter Park Golf Course's Community Emphasis

While the physical course itself provides a compelling product to customers by virtue of its improved conditioning and engaging design, WP9 also has gone a step further in trying to make the course beneficial to both golfers and non-golfers by virtue of different groups, events, and initiatives.

WP9 keeps with the tradition of a municipality offering an accessible golf option through their pricing structure. While critically-acclaimed renovations have been accompanied by vastly increased greens and membership fees at other courses, both municipally and privately owned, throughout the country, WP9 instead stuck to the model of accessibility. Prices have remained generally stable, and under the national average of \$36 for eighteen holes¹³⁸, as “rates are \$13-21 per round with a \$9 replay, [while] annual memberships start at \$900”¹³⁹. Although a low pricing structure is one example of the course trying to benefit golfers in the community, there are other aspects of their operations that take this too a more extreme degree.

WP9 offers a variety of unique and inclusive organizations and events that accommodate players from different ages and skill levels. To attract the less sizable portion of golfers, and in doing so keeping with the theme of accessibility and introduction to the sport, the course hosts clinics and tournaments for women and junior players¹⁴⁰. The course is also home to a Ladies' Golf Association. The Ladies' Golf Association then faces off with the Men's Golf Association

¹³⁸ Dan Kilbridge, “What Is the Average Cost of a Round of Golf?,” *GolfWeek* (USA Today, December 28, 2018), <https://golfweek.com/2018/12/28/what-is-the-average-cost-of-a-round-of-golf/>, para. 5.

¹³⁹ Young, “Part I”, para. 17.

¹⁴⁰ “Winter Park Golf Course Facebook Profile,” Facebook, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/WinterParkGolf/>

in the annual Challenge Cup¹⁴¹ lessening the gap between men and women players and forging a community built on inclusion and equality. On the theme of competition, the course plays a role for competitive golfers in the greater Orlando area by hosting the City of Winter Park Amateur Golf Championship¹⁴². This tournament, created after the renovation in 2017 and now held annually, aims at attracting players who may otherwise overlook a short, nine-hole municipal course. In doing this, they then bring these players, who may be outside of the traditional municipal golf demographic, together with the more diverse group that is able to frequent WP9 because of their structure. In addition to these events and organizations aimed at capturing players interested in traditional forms of golf, WP9 has also utilized the facility for more creative means.

For golfers, both experienced and new, seeking a unique, non-traditional experience, and to try to further take advantage of their busier season, the course hosts weekly Night Golf¹⁴³ events in the winter. These events are open to both the general public, again adhering to the principle of accessibility, as well as their membership. While Night Golf has become a tradition since the reopening of the course in late 2016, WP9 has also remained committed to trying different, innovative events to attract a wider audience. For example, in May 2019 the course hosted their inaugural Wine & Nine event¹⁴⁴. This event, which coincided with National Wine Day, allowed golfers to enjoy wine stations and hors d'oeuvres while playing the course and also

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Keith Rhebb, interviewed by author, June 3, 2019.

¹⁴⁴ "Winter Park Golf Course Facebook Profile."

featured live music and a social hour. While this commitment to providing golfers with a wide array of innovative events aims to endear and ingrain the course with the golfing members of the community, this still does not capture the full breadth of WP9's event and initiative offering that makes the course function as a public good for the non-golfing community members.

There are two key facets to this idea of having the course provide benefits to non-golfers. Because Johns and Rhebb were able to cut costs and time in their renovation, once finished with the renovation of the golf course, the duo decided to add a community putting course on the property. Named "The Back Nine", the course is "open dawn-to-dusk"¹⁴⁵ and is free for anybody who passes the course. While there are some rules to the area, for example players are urged not to drag their feet, run, or jump on the green, it is still a welcoming, open asset to non-golfers in the community. The second facet is in popular events like "Flicks on the Fairway". "Flicks on the Fairways" is an event series where the course plays host to families as they screen a movie actually on the golf course¹⁴⁶ for free. Families, whether they play golf or not, are encouraged to come to the course and watch family movies projected onto an inflatable screen set up on the course. This event series takes advantage of the clear space and well-manicured grass, while having nothing to do with golf. By combining these welcoming, non-golf events with a unique, high quality playing experience for golfers of different ages, genders, and skill levels, WP9 has become a community asset that benefits golfers and non-golfers alike.

¹⁴⁵ Young, Rick. "Winter Park's Success Story: Part III." SCOREGolf, March 29, 2019. <https://scoregolf.com/blog/rick-young/winter-parks-success-story/>), para. 9.

¹⁴⁶ "Winter Park Golf Course Facebook Profile."

Evaluating the Success of the New Winter Park Golf Course

WP9's financial position has improved steadily since reopening October 2016. In the final full fiscal year prior to the renovation (October 1, 2014 through September 30, 2015), the course made \$408,535.64¹⁴⁷ of revenue. Three years later in fiscal year 2018, even after the initial boost to rounds and revenue caused by the media attention surrounding its opening had dissipated, the course had increased its revenues by 90.4% compared to their 2015 results, making \$777,920.06¹⁴⁸. Following this trend of strengthening financial position, the course has been projected to make \$875,356.65 in revenue in fiscal year 2019. This revenue increase has many different causes behind it including an average 10.6% increase in rounds played¹⁴⁹ and, more importantly, a 237.7%¹⁵⁰ increase in event revenue. The end result of the extreme increase to revenue, along with maintaining a low cost structure is that course has gone "from losing money to revenue positive"¹⁵¹ since the renovation. The financial benefits of the renovation continue beyond the course as well as "real estate values around the golf course have increased dramatically"¹⁵² as well. The main conclusion to draw from this financial analysis of WP9 after the renovation is that from a purely economic perspective, WP9 is a resounding success.

¹⁴⁷ "Winter Park FY 2015."

¹⁴⁸ "Month-by-Month Breakdown of Revenue for Winter Park, FL's Municipal Golf Course for FY 2018" (Winter Park, FL, 2018))

¹⁴⁹ "Pursuing Innovation 2018" (City of Winter Park, FL), accessed June 3, 2019, <https://cityofwinterpark.org/docs/departments/finance/budget/budget-2018.pdf>

¹⁵⁰ "Winter Park FY 2018."

¹⁵¹ Graylyn Loomis, "Winter Park: A Look at Golf's Future?," Links Magazine, accessed June 3, 2019, <https://www.linksmagazine.com/winter-park-a-look-at-golfs-future/>), para. 8.

¹⁵² Young, "Part I", para. 32.

Through the new, compelling course and the commitment to golfer and non-golfer centric events, WP9 has become financial viable and thus, an asset to the community.

That being said, as highlighted in the opening sections of this paper, there is more to success than the purely financial for municipal golf courses. Profitability and revenue growth are a *key aspect* to success, as having a government owned facility hemorrhaging money in essence harms the community as whole, however, once these prerequisites have been met, there is still an added layer related to accessibility and common good. It is in these “other success” where WP9 provides perhaps a more valuable example of how a municipality can handle a failing golf course.

WP9’s course, that is to say not the myriad of events that are held by the facility, functions as accessible because of its architecture and its price. The architecture, through being playable and engaging, allows for any golfer to play and enjoy the course, effectively limiting the difficulty criticism of golf as a whole while also improving pace of play, the price, still low compared to national averages, allows for people from different socioeconomic backgrounds to at least have the option to try the sport at the facility. Golf may still be out of reach for some, however, WP9’s pricing does reduce the economic barrier that critics point to as being a major threat to golf’s viability as a whole. The wide array of events, organizations, and initiatives at the course, ranging from engaging less serious golfers to trying to grow the game amongst women and juniors, represent a deeper level of accessibility rooted in actively trying to attract a more diverse customer base. The course is then transformed into a common good, benefiting more than just the golfers in the community, through “The Back Nine”, events like “Flicks in the Fairway”, and the fact that the course allows walkers and joggers to utilize the perimeter of the course. Although they may not receive the benefits of playing golf specifically, these people do

receive the benefit of being able to actually utilize the green space provided by the course. An important thing to consider from these conclusions of how WP9 is able to be successful on non-financial levels is that maybe part of the financial success is a function of the non-financial ones. That is to say that, while providing a more compelling, yet still inexpensive product to a customer base does go a long way to increasing business, having the course also positioned as something that the whole community benefits may also increase the chances that it becomes more financially viable. By having it ingrained within the community, and so clearly be a positive to the municipality as a whole, the course may be more likely to receive community members' business. Regardless of if this last bit is true, it cannot be denied that Winter Park Golf Course has become a model for municipal golf course success because of its financial improvement, ability to remain true to the municipal tradition and prerequisite of accessibility, and the ability for it to provide a benefit to a more substantial group of the community than just golfers.

Conclusion: Winter Park's Lessons for Other Municipalities

The most general lesson that can be taken from Winter Park's success is not necessarily in any of the actual changes implemented by the course, but instead in the attitude that Leary, and the leadership and patrons of the course, have exuded throughout the entire process. Their support, trust, and openness to change are admirable and should not be ignored as major contributing factors to the resulting success of the renovation. Without this attitude, Johns and Rhebb may not have been hired or allowed to fully execute their vision and the course may not have ever offered the type of innovative, inclusive events that have made the course an integral part of the community. In this same vein, the community as a whole should be lauded for their support of the course and belief, like Leary's, that the course was, and still is, an asset. A supportive community and trusting, willing leadership are near-necessities for a renovation as large as Winter Park's to be successful and are the first, crucial steps towards success.

After fulfilling this requirement, there are a number of more operational lessons that can be implemented by municipalities looking to draw from Winter Park. The first of these involves architecture of the course. While this is not necessarily the most important part of Winter Park's success, the ability for the course to be enjoyed by all types of players, following in the municipal tradition of accessibility, is important. It is costly to do a full-scale renovation like at Winter Park, but courses can implement principles from Winter Park for little cost. Simple measures such as cutting back rough and trees to expose angle and expanding greens to offer new strategic hole positions, are low cost-alternatives to a full-scale renovation that still follow the architectural lessons set forth by Johns' and Rhebb's work. The goal, whether through a full renovation or not, is to provide a course that is accessible and compelling to customers through being playable and strategically designed.

Keeping with the theme of trying to reduce costs while still staying true to the Winter Park model is an emphasis on pricing. While price increases are tempting, especially following investment into improving the facility, keeping an inexpensive pricing structure is still important for the facility to remain accessible to different types of golfers. Events and organizations for all different types of people should be established to try to grow the customer base and, again, follow in the model of municipal accessibility.

The last lesson from Winter Park Golf Course involves benefitting the entire community. In addition to having walking and bike paths throughout the course, other municipalities should also consider finding ways for their courses to function as general community space. This could be through hosting events akin to “Flicks on the Fairway”, designing a miniature golf-like putting courses akin to the Back Nine, or through other, creative options. Either way, by having the course benefit the entire community through more than economic means, a municipality can further justify investment and grow non-golfer support of the course.

Through implementing some or all of these lessons laid out by the Winter Park model, municipalities can better position their golf facility for financial success, while also adhering to the necessary added responsibility of accessibility and providing a common good to the entire community.

Suggestions for Further Research

While Winter Park is the best, most comprehensive example of how to revitalize a dying municipal course, there are other facilities throughout the United States that have undergone similar changes since golf's low point in 2013. These courses include:

- *Jacksonville Beach Golf Club*: Jax Beach, as it is affectionately referred to by locals, is an eighteen-hole municipal course in Jacksonville Beach, Florida. The course underwent a full renovation in 2018 that resulted in a strategically designed golf course, similar to Winter Park's new design. After having only one profitable season in more than thirty years of existence, the course has made more than \$415,000 in the first full season since the renovation¹⁵³.
- *Aiken Golf Club*: Open since 1912, Aiken Golf Club is a family-owned eighteen-hole course in Aiken, South Carolina. Facing an uncertain future, owner Jim McNair Sr. rebuilt the course between 1995 and 1999 on a small budget. Amazingly, despite having no prior experience, McNair's maiden voyage into course architecture and construction resulted in a short, extremely interesting design that has drawn recent acclaim from Andy Johnson. In addition to similar design principles, the course's proximity to Aiken's town center and mini-golf like putting course draw even further comparisons to Winter Park¹⁵⁴.
- *Rockwind Community Links*: The brain-child of architect Andy Staples, Rockwind Community Links, a municipal facility in Hobbs, New Mexico, features full eighteen

¹⁵³ "About Us- Jacksonville Beach Golf Club," Jacksonville Beach Golf Club, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://jaxbchgolf.com/about/>)

¹⁵⁴ Andy Johnson, "Home Cookin' at the Aiken Golf Club," The Fried Egg, April 5, 2019, <https://thefriedegg.com/aiken-golf-club/>)

hole course as well as a number of other recreational activities. In addition to the design and adherence to common good, another noteworthy aspect of Rockwind is its commitment to environmental sustainability.¹⁵⁵

- *Goat Hill Park*: An eighteen-hole par three course in Oceanside, California, Goat Hill Park offers an alternative to a full-size golf course. Their commitment to providing a welcoming, communal atmosphere manifests in the attitude from John Ashworth, part of the management team of the course. About this Ashworth stated the following:

Everyone is welcome, from the beginner to the tour player and all abilities in between, from age 3 to 103, any gender, race, religion, everyone is welcome and treated with the same respect. We built a 3 hole kids course called the Playground where kids and their parents can play free and others can contribute to an honor box. We have a championship disc golf course, we're dog friendly, we don't have a dress code, we play music around the clubhouse. Our motto is "World Class / Working Class." We're proud of all the work we've done but we still have much more to do.¹⁵⁶

- *Keney Park Golf Course*: This municipal facility just north of Hartford, Connecticut features an eighteen-hole golf course with nine holes designed by Golden Age architect Devereaux Emmet and another nine from former city engineer Jack Ross. After years of diminishing playing conditions, the course underwent a full renovation by Matthew

¹⁵⁵ "About Us- Rockwind Community Links," Rockwind Community Links, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://www.rockwindgolfcourse.com/about-rockwind-golf-course>)

¹⁵⁶ "History," Goat Hill Park Golf Course, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://www.goathillpark.com/history/>), para. 4.

Dusenberry in 2014. The result is an architecturally-significant course, surrounded by a genera-use park, that hosted the Boys and Girls Junior PGA Championships, two of the premier events in junior golf, in 2019.¹⁵⁷

- *Sweetens Cove Golf Club*: Shortened to Sweetens by the droves of supporters on social media, the course is a nine-hole, bare bones facility redesigned by Rob Collins in 2014. Located in South Pittsburg, Tennessee, a tiny town forty minutes west of Chattanooga, the course has received widespread acclaim by everyone from established media outlets, to new-age social media golf influencers, to PGA Tour players. The course recently received a multi-million dollar investment by an investment group including former NFL: superstar Peyton Manning¹⁵⁸.

¹⁵⁷ “Keney Park Golf Course,” Keney Park Golf Course, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://www.keneyparkgolfcourse.com/>)

¹⁵⁸ “About- Sweetens Cove Golf Club,” Sweetens Cove Golf Club, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://sweetenscovegolfclub.com/pages/about>)

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