

**CITY OF NORWALK
OAK HILLS PARK AUTHORITY
REGULAR MEETING
DECEMBER 19, 2024**

ATTENDANCE: Alan Dutton, Chair; Richard Dellinger, Vice Chair; Denise Brown, Treasurer; Gary Leeds, Jennifer McAllister, Robert Stowers, Recreation and Parks Department Director; TJ Trimboli

STAFF: Paul Alexander, Golf Professional; Mark Gartner, Controller; Jim Hollyday, General Manager; Jim Schell, Superintendent

OTHERS: Alex Knopp, Craig Girona, Troy Jellerette, Lisa Montaine, Mike Garzone, Jeff Schwiebert, Bill S.; Eric Nees, Peter iPad, Katryn iPad
Jerry Crowley, Supporters of Oak Hills Park;

Virtual meeting via City of Norwalk's Zoom Platform and live on YouTube.

CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Dutton called the meeting to order at 7:03 p.m. A quorum was present.

ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES

• **November 21, 2024**

**** MR. DELLINGER MOVED THE MINUTES OF NOVEMBER 21, 2024.**

**** MS. MCALLISTER SECONDED.**

Mr. Dutton commented that the secretary had done a good job on the minutes.

**** THE MOTION TO ACCEPT THE MINUTES OF THE NOVEMBER 21, 2024 MEETING AS SUBMITTED PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

PUBLIC COMMENT

Mr. Dutton commented that at this meeting the Authority members would be discussing the proposed management team's recommendations for changes in the fees along with policy changes. He said that the Authority members would be considering the comments from the public or any written information that has been sent to them in advance before making any decisions. He reminded everyone that each speaker would need to give their name and address and would have three minutes to address the Authority members.

Mr. Troy Jellerette greeted the Board and lives on Ellen Street. He noted that he had been a Club member for 30 years and also a member of the Board of Estimate and Taxation for the last five years.

He said that the Club had a great season and had always been busy. The course conditions have been excellent despite some extreme weather the past few years. Both the golf staff and the restaurant have been wonderful.

Mr. Jellerette said that he was surprised to see the fee increases because the revenue rounds have increase and there is a strong cash balance. A number of capital improvements have been started in the fall. The loan is being well handled and the restaurant appears to be doing well.

He also spoke about the issue of eliminating the unlimited players tee time priorities. He asked why this was being considered. Member loyalty has been good and passes. He reminded the Board members that many of the members stood up and took on unlimited passes when times were hard. Mr. Jellerette said that he was paying up front for unlimited usage when he had no way to know if something happened for unforeseen reasons where he might not be able to use the full benefits. There are no rebates or pro-rata discounts. He pointed out that even with the unlimited pass, he still has to pay for the cart use and participates in tournaments. More has to be done to address the issue of Saturday and Sunday tee time demand.

He had several suggestions for handling the issue rather than eliminating that provision. One potential solution would be to mandate at all times on Saturday and Sunday mornings, in order for an unlimited golfer to get a tee time, all the members of the foursome must be unlimited pass holders.

Another possibility would be having one week-end a month where there is no priority reservations for any pass holder. It would allow all non-unlimited pass holders to have a chance.

Another suggestion might be to cap the unlimited rounds after a certain number of rounds that have been played and the pass holder would move down to the second level for picking tee times or the addition of a surcharge after a number of rounds.

Mr. Jellerette suggested that the Authority members go back and consider another way to handle the issue. He then spoke briefly about the fact that they can't determine the cost until the year's end because no one knows what the number of rounds a person will play until the year ends.

He said that when there are extra tee times, the staff send them out to Golf Now. The discount that a player would get there versus the discount that a player would get on the unlimited membership is not that great.

Mr. Knopp of Fifth Street said that he had a wonderful golf year and thanked the Authority members for maintaining such a wonderful municipal course.

Mr. Knopp said there was nothing on the agenda that indicated they would be adopting rates and suggested that this may be problematic regarding FOI. The agenda says that they would be holding a rates hearing, which is different from voting on the rates. He suggested that they consult with the City Corporation Counsel before taking action on the rates.

Mr. Knopp said he had submitted written testimony about seven issues and hoped that the Authority would consider them rather than voting on the rates the same night.

Mr. Dutton stated that the Authority had received Mr. Knopp's comments an hour and a half earlier and it had been distributed to the members of the Authority.

Mr. Knopp then outlined the seven issues he had concerns about and questioned as to whether or not the Authority should be acting on the rates at the meeting.

- A number of previous Authority Boards have raised the rates in order to deal with finances. With such an excellent season in terms of the number of rounds being played due to COVID and the improvements in the course, did the Authority consider not raising rates at all and if that would impact the finances of the course at all?
- The only rate reduction that is being proposed would be for non-residents. What is the balance between reducing rates for non-residents and raising rates for residents and what would be the net gain? For every non-resident player brought in by the lower rate, isn't there a risk of losing a residential player? Mr. Knopp asked if there had been a study done on this and requested to see the results.
- Thirdly, Mr. Knopp pointed out that Norwalk residents, both golfers and non-golfers, subsidize the course in two ways: first through paying the debt service even though the course is paying the City back over time; and secondly the City foregoes the property tax revenue on the course because it is a public park. Non-residential golfers come to play at the course but they do not contribute to the indirect subsidies. The Authority should not be cutting rates for non-residents while raising residential rates. At least both groups should be treated equally.
- Fourth, it appears that the ninth day for booking may be eliminated. Mr. Knopp wished to know if the Authority had done a study to determine whether or not the course is making money or losing money in terms of the unlimited pass. He pointed out that if the Authority did not know the answer to that question, why would they take away the incentive which was offered the last two years for the extra day of booking. He said that he had not seen any data that would justify eliminating that ninth day.
- Fifth, if the Authority eliminated the extra time for booking unlimited, there are still

groups that are given favored status such as the Oak Hills Women's Association receives a certain number of preferred tee times on Wednesdays. He said that if one preferred tee time is eliminated, all of these should be as a matter of equity. Otherwise, there should be rules regarding groups that come to the Authority looking for preferred tee times.

- Sixth, Mr. Knopp wished to know what the Authority was doing to increase the number of outings. While the 17 outings that were held this past year is an improvement over the past, he felt that the outings were a way to increase revenue to subsidize the green fees. This would help meet the course's financial needs, without imposing costs on resident golfers, especially the seniors. This is also why the restaurant was built with 144 seats for outing events.
- Finally, Mr. Knopp asked if the Authority had considered increasing the cart fees for non-residents rather than reducing the fees for non-residents and increasing the fees for residents

Mr. Knopp said that he was not present to oppose or support the fees, but simply to point out that there was not enough data to support the changes.

Mr. Aron Karp of 4 Cannon Brook Lane and has been a member for 12 years and a Norwalk resident since 1997. He said that he agrees with the previous speakers about the Authority and the course conditions but feels strongly about Authority keeping the ninth day for the unlimited pass. He noted that he was taking a risk by putting money up front, but there are other expenses, such as renting a cart and using the restaurant. If the incentive is removed, he would be golfing at other locations. This is an important incentive.

If the course is actually making money, he wished to know why they are raising the fees. If there is a financial surplus, why not give back to the club because the members supported the club during the trying times. Norwalk residents should be receiving the benefits of the unlimited pass.

Mr. Craig Gironda of 7 Junebar Lane, greeted the Board. He said he also agrees with the other speakers regarding the quality of the course and the staff. He said that the City golf course residents should have preference over non-residents. The non-residents should not have the same privileges as the residents. Seniors should have an unlimited pass with or without the nine days. Having a fixed cost for seniors is important. He asked what the reason was for eliminating the nine days and going to eight days.

Mr. Dutton said that the Board does not answer questions during Public Comment. There was no one else who wished to address the Authority at this time.

4. REPORT OF THE CHAIR

Mr. Dutton said that he had intended to welcome Mr. Sweitzer to the Board but he was not in attendance.

Mr. Dutton said that they would be discussing the rates and reminded everyone that they were not acting as individuals but as Authority members.

Mr. Dutton said that he and Mr. Schell had met with Mr. Lloyd and Marshall about the transition of the restaurant from a golf restaurant to a general restaurant and gave a brief summary of the discussion.

Mr. Gartner said that there was nothing to report on the Nature Advisory. Mr. Schell said that some topsoil had been delivered and the staff reported that the soil has been spread and the area has been seeded.

6. COMMITTEE REPORTS:

Tennis Committee: Denise Brown

Ms. Brown said that the tennis season is over and it is quiet. A fund raiser email outlining the accomplishments this past year was sent out to the various tennis teams. There has been about \$500 in miscellaneous donations. They would like have some donations for planting some tree where older ones had come down. The new fencing has arrived, but not been installed yet. Once that it completed, an application for reimbursement for ½ of the cost of the fence can be submitted to the USTA.

Supporters of Oak Hills Park: Jerry Crowley

Mr. Crowley said that they were finishing up the year and he said he would have some numbers for the Authority next month

Nature Advisory Committee:

This was discussed earlier.

Long Term Planning: Gary Leeds

Mr. Leeds said since it is the holiday season, activity has been slower. He said that he, Mr. Dutton and Mr. Dellinger had met with Mr. Ernie DesRochers about the long range planning. Mr. DesRochers has offered to help as they work through the project. The Committee members are suggesting some ideas and meetings will start in January to develop a new plan. He expects to have some timelines ready by February.

5. MANAGEMENT REPORTS:

a. Report of the Golf Professional: Paul Alexander. [34:06]

Mr. Alexander said that the weather became colder sooner this year and they are charging \$20 to walk the course. He gave a brief overview of the upcoming events and projects. Renovations are looking good and there are 10 or less staff members that are working solo shifts. Half of the carts have been put away for the winter. There is a new POS system and staff are being trained. Mr. Alexander said that he felt the new software would be great but they were still using Golf Now as the main engine. Steve Shepard has been a tremendous help in implementing the new system. A tentative 2025 outing schedule has been posted. Once the fees are finalized, copies of the contract will be sent to those who have schedule outings asking them if they would like to keep their tentative dates. The course conditions have been great and the repairs to the buildings have been good. They are looking forward to next year.

Mr. Dellinger asked how the rates figures were calculated. Mr. Alexander then gave the Authority a brief overview of the process. He said that key staff members meet to do some benchmarking against the other competitors. For the last several years, the Authority has been adding a dollar or two every year to the fees. This is less than the Cost of Living Index or the cost of inflation. The minimum wage increases and it is important for Mr. Schell to have solid workers on the course. The cost of goods has increased also.

b. Report of the Superintendent: Jim Schell

Mr. Schell said that he was working on Phase II of the bunker project, which is on the 11th tee. The crews are removing invasive species which attract spotted lantern flies. Maintenance is done and while there is no snow yet, it could come soon.

Mr. Leeds asked if the greens are ever roped off. Mr. Schell said that they are expecting snow tomorrow and Number 6 has been roped off. Discussion followed.

Mr. Dellinger asked when the tee would be moved on Hole 11. Mr. Schell said that when the bunker work is completed, the tee will be moved over. That should be next fall.

c. Report of the Controller: Mark Gartner

Mr. Gartner said that he had finished the financial report and there was \$17,000 in expenses, which is a \$3,000 increase for expenses. This means that rather than being \$156,000, the actual surplus is \$153,000. Revenue rounds are at 12.4% over budget year to date and cart rounds are 10.5% above budget year to date.

Regarding the Capital Budget, he explained that the figures indicate that they are under budget, but this is actually a timing issue. When the big bunker project is done, they will be close to budget. The bunker costs are being paid in installments and there will be a \$50,000 bill paid in December.

Mr. Gartner said that every year, he does a detailed analysis of the annual passes. This includes analyzing every pass holder and every round played. This data is then compared to a blended rate of the category that they would fall into (i.e. resident senior, non-resident adult, etc.). He gave the details and said overall, the Authority did make money, but only about \$1,000 or \$2,000. But, he reminded everyone that this was done on a calendar year of rounds ending on November 5th. There may be a few more rounds in November and December, but not much. He estimated that if those rounds are added in, there would most likely be a small loss on the passes this year.

Mr. Dutton noted that the utilities in November were fairly high. He asked if this was part of the \$5,000 budget. Mr. Gartner said that this was correct. Eversource increased the rates, but he was not sure if this was due to more work being done on the course and having a fully functional restaurant. It was probably the result of the increased activity and the increased electrical rates

d. Report of the General Manager: Jim Hollyday

Mr. Hollyday said that his report was included in the package. He gave a brief summary of his work.

He said that there was an issue with the property at 17 Chipping Lane, owned by Bob & Lynn Barate, which is adjacent to the 18th hole. There have been several complaints about golf balls landing in their driveway over a period of several years. In response to complaints, a net was installed and recently a higher net was installed. It sagged over a period of time and it will be serviced by the fencing contractor to maximize the height. However, recently a golf ball broke a piece of the siding on their home. Mr. Hollyday, Mr. Schell and Mr. Dutton went to speak with Mr. Barate. Mr. Barate was pleased that the Authority Chairman came to see the damage. Following the initial visits, it was agreed that the Authority would replace the garage door. The Authority and Mr. Barate would gather estimates and they would be reviewed. Mr. Hollyday also consulted with the Authority's attorney about this. Mr. Barate subsequently contacted Mr. Hollyday and said that he was most interested in a permanent solution to the problem, rather than a new garage door.

Ms. Brown had some questions about the discussions with the Authority's attorney. Mr. Hollyday said that he had some communication from the attorney and would send a copy to all the Authority members. Discussion followed.

OLD BUSINESS

Mr. Leeds asked if there had been a discussion regarding the pace of play. He said that he would like Mr. Alexander to address the four and a half hour play rule and having rangers asking groups to skip a hole if they are playing too slowly. He said he would like a recommendation from the Authority members regarding how they can address this issue.

NEW BUSINESS:

Mr. Dutton then read the legal notice that was published in The Hour for the record.

Following the Public Hearing, the Oak Hills Park Authority will discuss and approve the rates.

Mr. Dutton said that as the Chair, he heard the concerns from the Public Hearing speakers and noted that the question about why the Authority was raising the rates when the Club was doing so well. It was also important to the speakers that they take care of the Norwalk residents. The Authority members need to think about the Norwalk resident, the resident seniors and the non-residents. He cautioned everyone not to alienate the 70% of the players that use the course who non-residents. They provide a significant amount of revenue. He referred to the recommended rate changes and policy changes from the management team that were distributed to the Authority members at the last meeting. He then opened the floor for discussion by the Authority members.

Mr. Stowers said that some speakers had mentioned how things are handled in the business world and pointed out that golf is an industry. The Authority has to compare itself to others in the same industry. It's not in isolation. The expenses rise every year and the Authority has to keep up rather than waiting until they are in trouble before raising fees. That shouldn't be the way the Authority does business. Things have to be done in a business-like manner and they shouldn't stop doing things because there is a surplus. Mr. Stower said that he felt they should have a fee study done by an independent party and can look at it objectively. While he will probably vote to approve the increase in fees this time, in the future, the fee increase should not be done internally but from a professional outside golf consultant. As expenses increases, the fees need to increase also.

Mr. Dutton said that he fully supported the idea of an independent survey and they should benchmark how Oak Hills compares with others.

Mr. Leeds spoke about the non-resident rates. He said that he felt that they had reduced the greens fees for the adult non-resident by \$2 but did not raise the permit fee at all. However, permit fees for residents increased and the non-resident seniors. He asked for the rationale behind those changes.

Mr. Alexander said that when they raised the resident rate but not non-resident rate, they were trying to make it more consistent. Mr. Gartner said that some of the pricing was all over the place and they were trying to make it more in line going forward. Mr. Dutton said that he agreed with Mr. Leeds and did not see why the non-resident rate should go down, even if it was only by a dollar. Mr. Dutton felt that the non-resident rate should increase. Mr. Alexander and Mr. Stowers both agreed with this. Discussion followed about the amount the non-resident fee would increase.

Mr. Leeds suggested increasing the non-resident permit fee or discount card by \$10 or \$20. He gave the details and mentioned the eliminated the early bird rate.

Mr. Dellinger said that he felt the non-residents were not paying quite enough. Mr. Alexander then reviewed the figures from other golf courses that were charging non-residents bigger fees. He said that many of these courses were trying to protect their residents because before COVID, golf was not as popular. Mr. Leeds said he thought there were only about 150 non-resident passes to start with. He added that they should consider increasing the non-resident fees and keeping the resident fees static. Discussion followed.

Mr. Dellinger pointed out that there were 154 non-resident pass holders. 92 are seniors and 62 are adults. Mr. Alexander noted that Sterling Farms was using the same fee for Juniors, Seniors and adult non-residents.

Discussion followed about the fees listed on the spreadsheet. Mr. Gartner said that the idea was to keep all the daily fees the same, but have a higher buy in for the permits.

Mr. Alexander said that Steve Shepard had looked at 11 municipal golf courses, one of which is private, and noted that 2 of the 10 remaining ones do not offer non-resident passes. Seven of the 8 offer non-resident the same fee to play golf once they pay the membership fee, which Mr. Alexander thought must be higher. Sterling Farms allows non-residents to book the same as residents during the week but on the week-ends they allow residents to book two hours earlier. The week-ends are the high demand times and when most of the revenue is generated. Ms. Brown said that having this information on paper would be important to have before they consider the rates next year. Discussion followed about knowing what the area can actually afford from an independent consultant.

Mr. Leeds then addressed the cost of unlimited cards. Mr. Alexander said that there was no increase in the annual pass because they were proposing to change from nine days to eight days. A discussion of the proposed changes followed.

Ms. McAllister said that she felt better about the proposed changes now than she did before. She felt that it would be important to take care of the residents first before the non-residents. The residents supported the Authority during difficult times and it's time to give back. Mr. Gartner made the changes on the spreadsheet online.

Mr. Leeds said that he felt that the Authority needed to charge more because of the increased costs, such as minimum wage and the maintenance crews. He reminded everyone that they were not making money since they take the surplus and put it back into the course through capital project and long overdue repairs. Mr. Dutton agreed about the deferred maintenance and added that the Authority was paying off their debt and the cost of the leased equipment. There are still major capital projects like irrigation and major water issues that will be coming up in the future.

Mr. Dutton asked the Authority about their thought on lowering the nine day to eight days for the annual pass holders. Mr. Leeds said that the public had expressed their concern about this. He

asked Mr. Alexander to explain the decision for this reduction. Mr. Leeds said that he believed that these golfers were the core of Oak Hills.

Mr. Alexander explained that when this was started, the Authority did not have any money and this was a way to raise the funds quickly. There was a major insurance bill that had to be paid. This was a way to encourage quick sales. There have been other courses that have done similar things. They are trying to be fair to the 1200 members who have been getting boxed out of tee times. Since golf has become a popular sport again, the courses have been very busy. There are also many non-residents who supported the course.

Ms. McAllister asked what the benefit was between the nine days vs. the eight days. Mr. Alexander said that the first year, there were times when people could not get tee times unless they had an unlimited pass until 12 o'clock. The people who have the extra day just jump on all the early tee times. A lengthy discussion followed about the details of the public's ability to book tee times vs. the unlimited pass holders.

Mr. Leeds proposed that they consider not allowing anyone to book nine days in advance but the members and those who belong to the Oak Hills Golf Association be allowed to have a window from 6 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. to book their time. He felt that this might encourage more memberships in the organizations. He said that after 2 hours, the booking would be open to all discount or all members. Last year, there were 250 people in the men's club. These club members would have the ability to book time two hours before all others. Previously, there had been over 500 members. This would remove that ninth booking day and give them the same opportunity as the members to access that two hour window eight days in advance. Discussion about the details followed. The men's and women's golf associations are the core members and this would be a nice benefit.

Mr. Dutton then conducted a straw poll among those Authority members present online regarding Mr. Leeds' suggestion. There were five that were not in favor and two that were in favor. The general feeling was that it was a good idea, but the Authority needed to look into the details more, so they should consider it for next year.

Mr. Leeds said that they need to see if the system could handle this type of booking and also discuss this during the next three months before the course opens. They can survey the men's club also.

Mr. Dutton then reviewed the recommended rate changes with the Authority members. The non-resident adult rates would increase by \$2.00. For the Policy holders, the non-resident card would increase by \$20.00 to \$260.00; the non-resident senior card would increase by \$20.00 to \$250.00. Annual passes for non-residents will increase from \$2,900 to \$3,000 and the annual pass for non-resident seniors will increase from \$2,360 to \$2,500. For the policy changes, they will eliminate the extra day booking advantage for the unlimited daily pass holders. Discussion followed about the details of these changes.

Mr. Leeds said that he had just checked the website to verify the 2024 rates but it shows 2025 rates. Mr. Dutton said that they were required to post them. Mr. Hollyday explained that the link that takes the viewer to those rates says "Proposed Rates for 2025". Ms. McAllister said that when you view the page, it does not note that they are proposed. Mr. Dutton said that they had to post the proposed rates in several places. Discussion followed.

The discussion moved to the off peak rates and these were discussed. Mr. Dutton said that both of those rates should be increased by \$2.00. Mr. Gartner then displayed the comparison rates on screen.

**** THE MOTION TO APPROVE THE RATE CHANGES, THE POLICY CHANGES AND THE DISCOUNT CARDS FOR 2025 AS DISCUSSED.**

Mr. Dutton said that they would continue to discuss Mr. Leeds' earlier proposed. Mr. Dellinger said that he felt that the survey should go out to all the members and all golfers. Mr. Leeds said that he would like to see the earlier survey results since there were other things that the Authority could work on.

Mr. Dutton thanked all the staff and Authority members for their hard work and time in putting together this document.

NEW BUSINESS

Mr. Leeds said that he had spoken with a number of people about the website. He explained that there were a number of different websites, such as the supporters website and the tennis website. He proposed that the Authority discuss how to improve the links to the websites. This work should be done over the winter. Mr. Alexander said that he had done some of the work. The other websites should be more prevalent. Mr. Gartner said that the tennis website was a separate organization. Ms. Brown said that Kings Highway took the Oak Hills name. Mr. Stowers said that they should clarify their link descriptions. Mr. Alexander said that they should put up a drone photo of the course.

Mr. Dutton suggested a Technology Committee to review the website.

8. ADJOURNMENT

**** MR. DELLINGER MOVED TO ADJOURN.**

**** MR. LEEDS SECONDED.**

**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting adjourned at 9:27 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
S. L. Soltes
Telesco Secretarial Services

City of Norwalk
Oak Hills Park Authority
Regular Meeting
December 19, 2024