

Re: KPMG Report and Recommendations on Municipal Golf.

Submitted February 17th, 2020

Dear Sirs:

I am responding to your request for comments on the recent recommendation to Council regarding River Road Golf Course. As I understand it, council has directed staff to review the recommendation to close River Road including options for alternative uses for the property.

I have been a full time member of your courses since 1997 and have played an average of 100 rounds each year since that time. Although the majority of those rounds were played at Thames Valley I have also played many times at the other courses including River Road. The concern that I, and many of my fellow players have, is that restricting the review to River Road ignores the wider issue of the future of Municipal golf in our city. A year from now we could be looking at proposals to close Fanshawe and a year after that proposals for Thames Valley. It seems that now is the time to do a thorough review of the entire management and marketing of Municipal golf in our city.

There is no doubt that membership and participation in golf is declining. This is happening all over North America and there are various and well known reasons. These have been laid out by KPMG and do not need repeating here. Over the past 20 years I have observed locally the decline in the number of golfers, the lack of Junior players, fewer tournaments, smaller Men's and Women's Leagues and so on. Unfortunately it appears KPMG only addressed closures as a solution. Perhaps their terms of reference restricted them to that.

It may be that River Road should close. For "hackers" like me (and there are many of us) it is a difficult course. It is subject to flooding and has competition from many daily play courses nearby (East Park, Maple Ridge, Dorchester, Crumlin, Pine Knot) most of which have lower rates.

It is unfortunate that the course named for closing has the most attractive club house by far. If River Road closes we would certainly expect that the savings be committed to improving the remaining courses.

The Master Plan for Municipal Golf in London has always been to make golf "Affordable and Accessible". To that we should add "enjoyable". It is not affordable when the price for a daily green fees player with a cart exceeds the price at many other courses. It is not accessible when tee-times always seem so hard to get and the "on-line" reservation system crashes and the phones go unanswered. It is certainly not enjoyable when your shoes are covered in goose droppings, and the bunkers are as hard as cement, and a round takes five hours to play since there are no rangers on the course.

The city should realize that annual dues paying members are the foundation of the courses; the daily green fees players are where money and profit lie; and Junior golfers are the future. All these groups need to be catered to. The members in particular want to be proud of their course. They want to show it off to visitors they invite for a round. Dingy clubhouse, limited food and beverage selection, closed halfway houses, are not impressive and do not bring people back. There are more enjoyable courses to go to.

The issue of clubhouse decor and service can only be solved with capital investment. The kitchens are old and outdated, the atmosphere is uninviting, the menus limited. There is great potential to turn Thames Valley at least into a popular dining destination year round, and not just for golfers. The location and scenery could easily be marketed. However “You have to spend money to make money”. The city budget being what it is makes that difficult. Hopefully Federal infrastructure money is being aggressively sought. Also the food service should be contracted out to a professional and knowledgeable catering company. Years ago that seemed to work.

Marketing is the key to increased use and membership. Here are a few suggestions:

- Hire a marketing consultant.
- Regular and continual marketing in all forms of media.
- Loyalty rewards for members and green fee players.
- Packages such as burgers and fries with a round at certain times.
- Reduced rate tokens (5-10 a year) for members to use for visitors they bring along.
- Juniors play free for nine holes when accompanied by an adult.
- Earlier twilight rates.
- “Nine and Dine” packages.
- Stay and play packages with local hotels
- Regular newsletters to members and the media.
- Special event days for local clubs and organizations.

In regards to tee times there is a perception that the courses are overbooked and that it is difficult to get tee times. It is true that the tee sheet is often full. However the course is quite often empty. This has to be due to “no-shows”. A member can lose his privilege to book tee times in advance if he is a no show. I am not aware of any policy on general public no shows. There should be one. Another complaint from occasional players is the slow pace of play on city courses. Rangers should be assigned to the courses at peak times and the clock system should be put back in place.

As to course appearance something must be done, particularly at Thames Valley regarding the goose droppings. It is not only a mess but probably a health hazard. I personally am embarrassed to bring a visitor to the course. Also at Thames we have a beautiful river running along the last three holes. At one time it was a lovely, attractive sight. Now the river cannot be seen due to the ragged underbrush, scrub poplars and other overgrown weeds that have grown up in the last few years. Surely this can be cleaned up.

London’s Municipal Courses are gems. Most cities would love to have such a variety of venues and opportunities. Staff at the courses work hard to keep the courses playable and their patrons happy. They do their best with what they have and they are appreciated. Hopefully the city recognizes this and can develop both resources and a plan to keep golf in London affordable, accessible, and enjoyable.

Don Page
London.