

# Time for a solution in Tulsa

Tulsa Mayor G.T. Bynum reiterated publicly recently that there is no plan to close either of the city-owned golf courses at Page Belcher but don't think for a minute that hasn't been seriously considered.

Long-time municipal courses have closed recently in Little Rock and Wichita, two cities of similar size and golf populations to Tulsa. Wichita closed the L.W. Clapp course which it was subsidizing at a rate between \$200,000 and \$300,000 annually.

Little Rock closed War Memorial and Hindman golf courses after determining they were the biggest money losers in annual golf expenditures of \$2.6 million versus revenue of \$1.4 million for the four city courses.

Tulsa subsidized its two 36-hole facilities up to \$1.7 million annually in the past, but those days are over. The subsidy built into the budget now is \$75,000 and Tulsa Mayor G.T. Bynum expects the courses to do their best to toe that line. The problem is that leads to long-term deterioration, making it easier to justify eventual closure or repurposing of the land.

Subsidy is a dirty word for some city councilors, but let's face it, if every municipal course in the state that wasn't subsidized to some degree in either annual operations or periodic infusions of capital from bond issues were to close, there would be fewer than five municipal golf courses in the state. Maybe none.

Similarly, if every privately-owned public course had to survive only on its golf operation and no other motive (such as selling real estate or being an amenity to a resort or casino), they would mostly be gone as well and only private clubs would exist.

Thus it is absolutely crucial that each municipality decide if golf is important from a quality of life standpoint, to attract jobs, tourism, businesses and individuals, just like parks, zoos, museums and other entities that are subsidized whether they bring in revenue or not.

Tulsa has had a particularly difficult time expressing its philosophy toward golf. It wouldn't take that much of an investment to keep the two magnificent layouts at Page Belcher among the finest in the region, but it does take a consistent commitment that the city hasn't shown or recognized. Brought back up to proper condition, they should be able to break even or make money most years, but they will still need periodic investments of capital dollars for major projects. If you own them, that's your responsibility.

Homeowners in the neighborhoods sur-

rounding Page Belcher and golfers who account for the more than 60,000 rounds played there last year should ask now for the city to put in writing a clear, definitive mission statement regarding golf. If this is a lull in support for the courses and the next mayor will address the issue, that's much different than if a plan is being discussed to potentially close any holes.



**Tulsa Mayor  
G.T. Bynum**

The slowly deteriorating conditions are no fault of the current superintendent and his crew. If there is no money for tree trimming, for fertilizer in the zoysia fairways, for new drains and liners in the bunkers, for fescue grass in shaded areas, for cart path repair, for sod, for replacing the dilapidated clubhouse and everything in it, then the result will eventually be a worn-out track incapable of hosting tournament play.

Tulsa's last capital investment in the courses was in 2002 when Stone Creek was renovated by United Golf and architect Randy Heckenkemper for \$4 million (and it was spectacular). Only a few years later, with annual subsidies reaching \$1.7 million (mostly due to the since discontinued use of union maintenance labor on the four courses) Tulsa mayor Kathy Taylor led an unsuccessful effort to close 27 holes.

Tom Wolff, who operates the courses for contractor Billy Casper Golf, has told the city he could bring the courses back into competitive condition with either an annual subsidy of \$400,000 for 72 holes (\$100,000 per course), or having the city pick up the tab at its own courses for the water bill and utilities, a practice common in many places including right down the road in Oklahoma City, which operates one of the most successful public golf programs in the country.

The maintenance budget for all 36 holes at Page Belcher (\$633,000) is significantly less than what suburban competitors Bailey Ranch in Owasso and Battle Creek in Broken Arrow each spend on 18 holes.

If Bynum has decided that golf is not part of the city's mission, tell us that clearly and let's see if that opinion holds the day. If the city does want to remain in the golf business long-term, what is the plan for success? A simple mission statement would go a long ways towards letting us know what to expect and giving folks at the city, whether in the administration, parks department, park board or city council, a clear understanding of what the goal is.

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