



January 11, 2022

Submission to Infrastructure and Environment Committee, City of Toronto  
**IE27.6 Review of City of Toronto Golf Courses**

Thank you for the chance to comment on municipal golf courses. This proposal from Parks, Forestry and Recreation is euphemistically called a “hybrid model”.

Unfortunately, though the public showed a strong desire for change in last summer’s consultation, the golf course plan before you now is very much a status quo approach; more of the same tired old thinking. What the city needs instead is a deep rethink about how we allocate our public green spaces.

Toronto Field Naturalists have been calling for transforming the city’s golf courses for a number of years, as part of a coalition including Toronto Environmental Alliance and urban food gardening groups. There is widespread support for such a change.

Last summer, the top takeaway from the City’s online survey about golf courses, with 6,600 respondents, was that people want to see three things: Improved trail access and connectivity, tree planting, and natural area restoration. Your own survey people found that: “These three opportunities unanimously resonated for both golfer and non- golfer groups as well as other user segments.”

So why are these greening opportunities being neglected in the proposed golf plan?

Even before the pandemic, Torontonians were pressed for green space. With our rapidly growing population, many of us (roughly 40% by the 2016 census) live in tall buildings or apartments, and rely on parks for fresh air and nature. Here’s a warning Council got from the City’s Parks, Recreation and Forestry Department in the 2019 Budget “Maintaining parkland provision across the City is becoming increasingly difficult in the face of high growth, decreasing availability and increasing cost of land acquisition.”

And again, here’s what City’s Parks manager warned last summer, just six months ago: “A key trend identified in the Parkland Strategy is the declining provision of parkland per person over time”

As a public health measure, we need to ensure that city people have easy access to nature on a daily basis; for a morning walk, for a visit after school, for a weekend outing. That’s a basic mental health need. Public health experts everywhere agree on this. Toronto Public Health did it’s own review in 2015 and confirmed that need for public green space.

“Green space improves physical health, mental health and wellbeing of urban residents. Frequent access to nearby green space is important, especially for children. Nearby green space may provide added benefit in low-income neighbourhoods.”

Clearly, nature is not a frill for a 21st century city. We should see nature as a terrific preventative measure to prevent disease – physical issues like cardiovascular diseases, but also a strong way to maintain mental health for our population.

In contrast, golfing as a participation sport has seen a long decline in the GTA and across North America. Most of Toronto’s golf courses were created in the late 1950 or 1960s, when golf was king. But right now, those green spaces are only available to people playing golf. Worse still, right now, three golf courses (Don Valley, Dentonia and Tam O’Shanter) block public ravine trail access. That might have seemed OK in the 1950s. That’s not OK now.

What’s more, the use of our municipal golf courses by golfers has been declining over the 2013-2019 time-frame.

The proposal before you disregards both the pressures for public access to green space and the long-term decline in golfers. The proposal also brushes aside the City’s own biodiversity strategy and ravine strategy. Instead, as though it were stepping back in time, the Parks proposal is requesting \$8.8 million dollars in its 10-year Capital Budget for freshening up golf courses.

Toronto Field Naturalists urge your committee to send this very flawed proposal back to staff for a rework. We urge your committee to insist on;

- naturalizing flood plain areas to support wetlands and bird habitat on all the golf courses
- planting native trees and shrubs on all the golf courses
- adding trails for public access – not just in winter months, but in the warmer seasons, when people most need to get out into nature.

TFN and other nature stewardship groups are ready and eager to help with revisioning plans, with finding win-win solutions, and with on-the-ground restoration work.

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