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San Jose weighs closing a golf course to stem financial losses

By Ramona Giwargis | rgiwargis@mercurynews.com (<mailto:rgiwargis@mercurynews.com>)

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A golfer studies his shot at the ninth hole at the Rancho Del Pueblo golf course in San Jose on Tuesday, August 16, 2011. (LIPo Ching/Staff file photo)

SAN JOSE -- San Jose's two newest golf courses are likely to remain money-losers for years to come, according to a new city audit that cited their high debt costs and the game's fading popularity and suggested selling all or part of one or turning some links into soccer, softball or baseball fields.

San Jose built the two courses, Rancho del Pueblo and Los Lagos, early last decade amid bullish predictions about the sport's growth. But they've never earned enough to cover operating and debt costs, draining more than \$2 million from the city each year to subsidize them.

The audit, which the City Council will consider next month, is renewing cries at City Hall to explore other options.

"We have these courses open, but very few people play in them and we can't be subsidizing them for ever," said Councilman Tam Nguyen, whose district includes the money-losing Los Lagos course, which opened in 2002.

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But the city's golf courses also have their defenders who they provide affordable access to the sport.

Longtime golfer Bill Hubka, 76, said losing some of the links would drive golfers to play out of town and will hurt numerous local tournament groups.

"I think that is a real loss for the city and a tremendous backward," Hubka said. "Golf was very popular many years ago; now it's not as popular, but it doesn't mean it won't be popular again."

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- The auditor's report shows the city has subsidized its golf courses with \$2.2 million last year, to cover operating losses and debt. That number is expected to reach \$2.6 million this year. The city owns three courses: Los Lagos, Rancho del Pueblo and San Jose Municipal Golf Course. But only San Jose Muni, which opened in 1968 and has no remaining debt costs, is making money -- about \$400,000 a year -- for the city.
- The other two have seen revenues drop dramatically as golf play decreased by 28 percent at the 18-hole Los Lagos, and 42 percent for Rancho del Pueblo, which has nine holes spanning 31 acres.
- Both golf courses are losing about \$300,000 a year, and face a mountain of debt -- \$18.3 million for Los Lagos and \$4.5 million for Rancho del Pueblo.
- That means City Hall is going to have to make some tough decisions about the future of its public golf courses. The auditor's report outlines a few choices: The city could sell a portion of the golf course lands to pay off their debt, reconfigure the land for a soccer, softball or baseball fields, or keep all three courses and try to reduce annual losses by boosting usage.
- But Los Lagos would need to grow usage by 60 percent and Rancho by 140 percent to fully cover operating losses and debt service, the report said.
- That seems unlikely given the competition from at least 23 other golf courses within 25 miles of downtown San Jose.

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softball or baseball field satisfies a growing need for more sports fields, though the report says it would require one-time conversion costs.

"We must make good use of the land to accommodate more people," Nguyen said. "It's better to have a few people benefit from the land instead of so few people."

Councilman Donald Rocha, whose children are involved with softball, soccer and other youth sports, said there's a shortage of fields and complexes for games. But he's not convinced the embattled golf courses are the right spots. He said Rancho del Pueblo would be "my last choice" for field conversion.

"I'm very reluctant to give up on this particular golf course if we haven't done our due diligence to look at other sites," Rocha said.

This isn't the first time San Jose has tried to rid itself of the money-bleeding golf courses. A 2011 effort to sell part of Rancho del Pueblo and build condos was met with sharp criticism, public outcry and an ugly political fight. But if the city chooses to close a golf course this time around, the auditor suggests a community engagement process.

Closing Rancho del Pueblo, which has half the number of golfers as Los Lagos on any day, would damage a nonprofit that aims to teach youth healthy habits through golf. The First Tee of Silicon Valley served 1,030 youth last year through the program, and nearly 77 percent of the kids were taught to play at Rancho del Pueblo. The organization contributed \$50,000 in revenue to the golf course, according to Executive Director George Maxe.

Maxe was one of dozens of people that flooded a Parks and Recreation Commission meeting Wednesday to speak on the audit. The commission voted 7-1 to accept the report, but will send a letter to the City Council opposing closing the golf courses and asking for other solutions. Commissioner Virginia Thomas was a dissenter.

"If they closed Rancho, we would not be able to move the program to Los Lagos because it does not look out that's safe for young people," Maxe said Thursday. "We would continue our program but the question is will San Jose's youth travel to other cities? My guess is they wouldn't."

Councilwoman Magdalena Carrasco, whose district includes Rancho del Pueblo, said she'll oppose a plan to close it, especially to build retail or office space. But if the community wants to convert the course in to a baseball or soccer field, she'll support it.

"Where I would draw the line," Carrasco said, "is developing it into anything other than open space."

Follow Ramona Giwargis at [Twitter.com/ramonagiwargis](https://twitter.com/ramonagiwargis) (<http://Twitter.com/ramonagiwargis>) or contact her at 408-920-5705.

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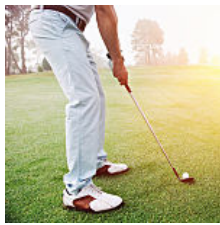
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Join the discussion...

Paul Prestak · 9 days ago

What does Los Lagos layout is "not safe for young people" mean?? The high school kids play there.

^ | v · Reply · Share >

Johnny · 16 days ago

In my opinion as a bay area golfer, I stopped playing Los Lagos because of the horrible layout of par 3's which creates the overall par of 68 which baffles me as I am used to the traditional 72 par tally for a round of 18. The bottleneck of the par 3's adds at least 1-2 hours to the playing time due to poor tee time booking management. Initially they probably stacked up the booking process as a money making scheme without thinking of the negative long term effects this might have on returning golfers. Lets be honest no one should have to endure a 6 hour round of 18 because of bottlenecks.

If they re-designed the course to be able to complete a round of 18 in 4 hours tops I might actually return there as it is a beautiful course and offers a variety of challenges. I would hate to see this course go, however, due to overcrowding of the course and the lengthy delays this creates, this course is a do not play course in my book. If they re-designed the course or created more space between tee times to compensate for the par 3 bottle necks, the experience might be enough to bring people back. This course could be a money maker with a few simple fixes on the course and improved management of tee time bookings by spacing them out farther to avoid the bottlenecks in my opinion.

^ | v · Reply · Share >

Dr. Strangelover · 18 days ago

I prefer to play at CordeValle. Maybe once these courses close, most of those players can come and join me for a few rounds. You pay your own way, of course.

^ | v · Reply · Share >

Joe in San Jose · 18 days ago

If the city hired some staff at Los Lagos that were not so nasty and mean, there would be more play. I know dozens of golfers who will not play there.

^ | v · Reply · Share >

Mark Romoser · 18 days ago

Here's a thought: Use the land thus freed up to build badly needed emergency housing. This would have the added benefit of making George Carlin's old bit about "golf courses for the homeless" come to life! :-)

^ | v · Reply · Share >

intergalacticSpartacus → **Mark Romoser** · 18 days ago

If profit is what's on everyone's mind, I doubt they'd ever consider low-income or emergency housing. More like overpriced high-density housing sold to the highest bidding developer. Because another 1000 cars is what Capitol Expressway needs.

^ | v · Reply · Share >

sociopathic · 18 days ago

Stupid.

You're going to close a golf course (generates money) and convert it to a softball or soccer field?

That's still a money wasting endeavor!

Let's look at the statement:

He said converting part of the land into a soccer, softball or baseball field satisfies a growing need for the space, though the report says it would require one-time conversion costs.

One-time conversion costs are big bucks as the "rolling" greens need to be flattened and the land changed. That's millions of dollars, tens of millions more than likely. Then you have the ongoing maintenance costs, the water costs, the electricity costs, etc. The costs don't stop simply because you convert them.

Then there is the lost opportunity cost. Taxable dollars? Sales tax? Use tax? Nada, nada and nada.

How about SELLING the property. Real estate is hot and the more development you create to address the demand side, the more you can create "affordable" housing.

How many acres of high density housing are we talking about? Town houses? Condos? Come on.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

ellafino → sociopathic · 18 days ago

The problem is that the two courses are costing 2 million a year in maintenance costs. With the drought I can't believe that more than one golf course is allowed to exist in a city.

^ | v · Reply · Share >

Mark Romoser → sociopathic · 18 days ago

Another golf course, Pleasant Hills over by Lake Cunningham, has been on the market for quite a while at \$115 million. The market for huge properties like these may not be as hot as one would think.

^ | v · Reply · Share >

Glaird · 18 days ago

Just one anecdote about gov't operated businesses: Santa Clara Co. took over the Santa Teresa golf course a ways back. Until then, green fees were competitive, the range was competitive, and one could buy block time on the range (One lump fee bought a discounted quantity of buckets to hit.). A lot of us neighbors used the course and the range.

Then the current operator, with a distinctly entitled attitude, took over with the shift to the county. Setting green fees to compete with the rise or fall of supply/demand of golfers escape this gift to the business world. He eliminated the concept of block time on the range, thus ridding himself of those annoying guaranteed range users, who prepaid for services offered. Lastly, customers were more of an annoyance interfering with his maintenance of the course. Now, the only individuals I tend to see out there are the deer, escaping the predation of the mountain lion that lives up on the hill.

I have a novel idea. How about leasing, at a deep discount, these two courses to a viable business, attempting to make a profit, and see if they can't turn those facilities around. Plus, they might make golf affordable and popular again in their respective neighborhoods.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

hoapres · 18 days ago

We can level the golf courses and have a tech company set up a concentration camp with all their H1B slaves confined to the premises instead of having 12+ H1Bs living in a studio apartment paying \$5K a month in rent.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

Cherry Coke → hoapres · 18 days ago

I hear of these stories. All the H1Bs at my company are buying or looking to buy houses while I am just getting by as an Admin.

^ | v · Reply · Share >

Glaird → hoapres · 18 days ago

I bet if you looked at actual compensation, you'd find the situation in high tech has gotten so bad, it is displaced American citizens that need a homeless shelter, after being overlooked and crowded out of good paying positions, by the flood of 100K/yr H1-B visa holders.

^ | v · Reply · Share >

intergalacticSpartacus → Glaird · 18 days ago

My company goes H1-B only when we can't find a citizen who can fill the job. Fact is that there are a ton more computer science experts available globally than there are in the Bay Area. It's about finding that person with the right expertise and toolkit, like a puzzle piece. Not all are the same.

(And as far as the golf course, I play at Los Lagos and enjoy it, so I hope it stays around. At least I hope it doesn't get sold to a developer for more cookie-cutter high density housing. Not much open space left.)

^ | v · Reply · Share >

Glaird → intergalacticSpartacus · 18 days ago

You might be able to snow someone who hasn't worked in the industry. I was there for 35 years. I was on interview teams. I was assigned, for a time, to scour the HP 200K resume DB for "supposedly unqualified Americans". I found 1000's more than qualified.

I also made a career out of fixing, making work, the complete trash that those "global experts" produced. HP would take those projects away from their golden children before they failed. Then they give it to a lowly American from a State Univ. to fix, so as not to embarrass the hiring managers.

You're propagating a big lie.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

intergalacticSpartacus → Glaird · 18 days ago

I'm not trying to snow anyone. I'm writing how my company looks for people. But we're not HP.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

hoapres → Glaird · 18 days ago

That;s exactly what is happening. We should just tell the truth to prospective H1Bs that they are to be considered SLAVES to the high tech companies.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

BroncoBilly · 18 days ago

The demographics of the city and surrounding area has changed. I'm sorry that golf has waned in popularity, but we are desperate for (good) soccer fields. Youth and adults would love to play on pitches that were even as fractionally cared for as golf links are. The school fields are horrible and overused. Parents are trucking regularly to Morgan Hill, Davis, Fremont, Pleasanton, Ripon (basically anywhere but San Jose) to go to tournaments. Would love to have a fantastic facility right here at home. The city and county have fallen short on addressing the need for parks. This is a great opportunity.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Paul Prestak → BroncoBilly · 9 days ago

I don't think there is any land on the premises of Los Lagos that could be turned into a soccer field. It's pretty hilly terrain.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Patrick Pizzo → BroncoBilly · 14 days ago

In 2000, voters in San Jose passed Measure P. In the promise of that bond measure was a 6 to 8 field soccer complex and a similar sized, adult softball complex. Both are in planning; neither has been realized! The City works on a different dynamic (15 years!) than HP or Apple! Our City leaders have no intention of recreational fields: it is high density housing that will get the nod, with a turn-key, half Basketball court, tot lot and a bench for recreation.

and I believe its actually 4 fields at Coleman?

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

ellafino → BroncoBilly · 18 days ago

They are building 10 fields right next to Avaya Stadium.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Bojorco → BroncoBilly · 18 days ago

"Pitches"? You only get to call it that if you're a foreigner. Same for "kit" and "boot." I could let "clash of heads" slide because it sounds funny and cool.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Hunter · 19 days ago

Why does a city golf course have to be profitable? Like all parks they are a service to the people of the city who already pay for them. NOTHING the city offers in terms of services is "profitable". The "profitability" argument is a straw man aimed at selling these beautiful green belts to real estate developers.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

ellafino → Hunter · 18 days ago

Because as a tax payer I would rather my money go towards facilities that everyone actually uses rather to a costly leisure activity for retirees and doctors.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Patrick Pizzo → ellafino · 14 days ago

In perspective, \$2M is from an overall City Budget of \$2.9 billion. It is the worth of 2 homes in this valley. We subsidize symphony, opera, the arts, trails, neighborhood parks... it is called 'quality of life' and that is what Cities and municipalities do. We are the 10th largest City in USA for goodness sakes.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Hunter → ellafino · 17 days ago

Define a "facility" (I assume you mean park) that "everyone" uses that you would prefer. BTW, if you think golf courses are costly you need to look at the overall park budget. - It's over \$50 Million. When you're done with that provide a demographic breakdown of park users

throughout San Jose so your response won't sound so uninformed.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Bojorco → Hunter · 18 days ago

They don't need to be profitable, but they would do well to hemorrhage less money than they are.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Hunter → Bojorco · 17 days ago

The terms "profitability" and government services are mutually incompatible. Our city services are already paid for by the taxpayers via our taxes and user fees. Our city budget is nearly 1 billion dollars ALL of which is spent every year. Fees augment that income but every city service is a loser from a profit/loss standpoint. But then that's not the point. Service is.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Ima Knut · 19 days ago

Probably want really to sell the land and build high density housing. Follow the money. I don't trust any of them. When did golf courses ever make money. Now if they want to turn it into a park, they have my vote.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Ali Bin Mashoud · 19 days ago

Has anyone analyzed how these courses' finances would operate if the expensive management corporation that runs them were eliminated? Is it a coincidence that the two courses losing \$300,000 per year are by the same company and the one, San Jose Muni that makes a \$400,000 profit, is not? The city of San Jose could probably save a big portion of the shortfall every year if only it took over and managed these other two courses exactly as inefficiently as the highly paid management company currently does.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

sociopathic → Ali Bin Mashoud · 18 days ago

Who should run it? The Government?

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

tompiperson · 19 days ago

Keep all the golf courses open at great expense to the vast majority of people who will never play the pointless waste of time game!! Let's spend millions more on polo fields for elite snobs, shuffleboard fields for people who get seasick on cruises, jai alai fields for whatever the hell jai alai is, and some place for La Crosse. (Stations of La Crosse?) Maybe some of those Mayan ball courts, too. Anything to waste tax money on unnecessary nonsense instead of fixing potholes.

I could see using part of the land for a soccer pitch; that seems to be ascendant as the number of Latinos and middle-school girls increases, but golf is going the way of the hula hoop. Build some more of those godawful three-story condos that are taking over the city.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

intergalacticSpartacus → tompiperson · 18 days ago

Damn dude, get back on your meds.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Steve Goldschmidt → tompiperson · 18 days ago

So as long as the space is used for a sport you like, it's all good?

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Patrick Pizzo → Steve Goldschmidt · 13 days ago

But doesn't it cost money to develop a sports field, to run it, to manage the grounds, to make improvements? Bottom line is if you sell what is now recreational property and open space and use SOME of the funds to build a soccer field, it is a net loss to a City that is planning by "Envision San Jose 2040" to have 400,000 residents by 2040. Those people are going to need recreation and some of them, yes, will be golfers.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

tompiperson → Steve Goldschmidt · 18 days ago

I care nothing for any sports, but it seems that a lot of people do like soccer or futbol. I would vastly prefer just open spaces with grass and trees to any kind of sporting field. Golf is no more stupid or pointless than any other sport.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Patrick Pizzo → tompiperson · 13 days ago

Okay Steve, you are not a golfer. But, when you get there (in the golden years), many

of your senior colleagues will seek to participate in active sports, and the options narrow. Soccer becomes a less likely choice. Golf can be played by seniors on flat, short courses: like Rancho. Sure there are 24 other golf courses around: but none that are flat, focus on the short game, and are tolerant of beginners. Go out to Rancho, buy a cup of coffee, sit by the range and watch what goes on. Remember too that Rancho is on the east side of San Jose. This open space, and it is that, is highly important to the community. In fact, Rancho is not just a golf course, it is a meeting place for young and old alike. The family that gave the former Thunderbird golf properties to the City expressed the 'intent' for the property to remain open space and be available for the enjoyment of local residents. They did it with a hand-shake in the late 1990's and you probably can imagine how the City is honoring that intent! Not legally binding. Nevertheless, think about this action in terms of the importance of this resource to a community that doesn't have a lot of City resources, and certainly not open space.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Hunter → tompiperson · 19 days ago

No city parks make money... your personal dislike of the game is not the point.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

This comment was deleted.

Steve Goldschmidt → Guest · 18 days ago

You've been out of the loop Sam. The days of any course being packed on weekends or having a long wait list are LONG gone. The SJ Muni survives mostly on range and cart revenue. Its a mediocre track with a horrible management team. Its simply attrition at work, Too many courses popped up in the 90's and early 2000s and now some contraction is needed. The industry as a whole is hurting because it is an expensive and time consuming sport. Many folks don't have the time or money to play 18 any longer. Simple.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Johnny → Steve Goldschmidt · 16 days ago

Steve, I have to disagree with your comments about no waitlists. I play the Peninsula quite often and between Shoreline and Palo Alto, it is very hard to get a tee time let alone get a round of golf completed in under 5 hours due to the massive crowds there. During the week its a different story however weekends the demand is still strong. Which golf courses are you going to LOL I need to check those ones out !!!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Gary K. McCormick → Guest · 19 days ago

The two courses which are running in the red, Los Lagos and Rancho, are operated by a private management group; San Jose Muni, which is profitable, is operated directly by the city (this information is all in the article.) So, that's your theory blown out of the water isn't it?

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Steve Goldschmidt → Gary K. McCormick · 18 days ago

SJ Muni is not operated "directly" by the city. It is subcontracted out to the Mike Rowitzer Group (same with Santa Teresa). The SJ Muni management is horrible (Bob McGrath is like Michael Scott on "The Office" - only a little less bright). That course survives largely in part due to its driving range revenue - a two-tiered range open till like 10-11PM.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Glaird → Gary K. McCormick · 18 days ago

Are these "private contractors" bidding competitively for the privilege of operating these courses? Or, did they buy the business and land outright and operate them independent of any gov't agency altogether?

I suspect, as private concerns, they are private contractors in title only, hand picked by city officials.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

johnnybopbop2 · 19 days ago

Close them down and open more restaurants and bars!

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

intergalacticSpartacus → johnnybopbop2 · 18 days ago

Yes, restaurants and bars have a wonderful track record of staying open.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

1 2 | > < • Reply • Share >

Steve Goldschmidt → johnnybob2 • 18 days ago

Right...because there aren't enough places to get fat and drunk already.

2 ^ | > • Reply • Share >

Dr. Strangelover • 19 days ago

Let's close these golf courses, build high-density in their stead, then use the money to hire more cops. Given the locations of those golf courses, you are definitely going to need more cops.

3 ^ | > • Reply • Share >

Patrick Pizzo → Dr. Strangelover • 13 days ago

Of course, kids that go to "First Tee" learn life's lessons and become focused individuals.... as their parents attest at the prior attempt to sell Rancho (thwarted by a 'early payment penalty' in the loan agreement). So because of First Tee, you don't need more policeman. What is First Tee? Google it: First Tee, Rancho del Pueblo.

And what City services come in to play for the High-Density model of City dwelling? Take the long view.

^ | > • Reply • Share >

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