



# PARKS & RECREATION COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes of December 13, 2017

City Hall – Council Chambers  
411 W 1<sup>st</sup> St



## I. Call Meeting to Order

President Schmidt called the meeting to order at 5:02 pm.

Schmidt: Welcomed new Parks Manager, Will Roche to the public and shared that he moved to Duluth with his wife and young son. Noted the wealth of knowledge and experience Mr. Roche brings to Duluth.

Roche: Thanked President Schmidt and stated he has enjoyed his first 34 days, and looks forward to exploring what Duluth has to offer.

## II. Roll Call

Present: John Schmidt, Erik Torch, Amanda Crosby, Tjaard Breeuwer, Dudley Edmondson Dennis Isernhagen, Britt Rohrbaugh, Tiersa Wodash, Dean Vogtman, Michael Schraepfer, Em Westerlund (City Council Liaison), Frank Jewell (St. Louis County Board Liaison),

Not present: Kristin Bergerson, Art Johnston (ISD 709 School Board Liaison)

## III. Approval of November 8 Meeting Minutes

Commissioner Breeuwer motioned for approval of the November 8, 2017 meeting minutes; second by Commissioner Rohrbaugh. Unanimously approved.

Schmidt: Apologized for length of previous meeting and expressed his commitment to keeping them manageable going forward. Stated that the Commission is committed to an open and respectful public process, and the bylaws state that members of the public who wish to speak to an issue may do so, for a time period not to exceed three minutes. Requested that the public sign up in advance to speak. Recited the mission of the Duluth Parks and Recreation Commission and highlighted the sixth guiding principle of the Duluth Parks and Recreation Master Plan and its three objectives:

- Connect with Nature – Duluth is defined by its natural resources that attract residents and visitors
  - Manage it – emphasize management and improvement of access to existing natural resource-orientated parks for outdoor recreation
  - Preserve it – Preserve and protect priority natural areas such as stream corridors, the lake front, the St. Louis River, Park Point, and other significant woodlands and hillside area.
  - Coordinate and Partner – Work with the County to coordinate the preservation of the tax-forfeited lands identified as high priorities for recreation or natural resource protection

Schmidt: Recited quote from the book, *Choose Wisely* by Gary Boelhower. Stated that they must do their best to work together to solve issues, reciting a quote by Paul Wellstone, “we all do better when we all do better”.



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### IV. Presentations

- A. Spirit Mountain Master Plan – Adam Fulton, Manager of Community Planning Division, City of Duluth (action requested)

Fulton: Thanked Parks Commissioners and extended his appreciation for having the opportunity to share the Spirit Mountain Master Plan. Introduced Brandy Ream, Spirit Mountain Recreation Authority's Executive Director. Indicated they are here tonight to answer any questions, noting they came before the Parks Commission in October and November with a presentation of the plan. Stated that they are looking for action tonight, emphasizing that this plan is different from Mini-Master Plans typically seen by the Parks Commission, in that it updates regulatory controls of Spirit Mountain. Stated that the Spirit Mountain Plan is outlined as a specific statutory action of the City of Duluth, which will control zoning of the area after approved by City Council.

Torch: Expressed appreciation for the thorough presentation given at November meeting, at which time many questions were answered. Motioned for support of the Spirit Mountain Master Plan by the Parks Commission.

Edmondson: Seconded motion for support.

Breeuwer: Stated that at the last meeting several individuals mentioned use of the term paddling center and how it did not match terms used in the St. Louis River Plan. Questioned if they considered replacing this term to match other planning documents.

Fulton: Indicated they received this input, and noted that this plan is for statutory boundaries of Spirit Mountain, not how they use or access the river. Confirmed that they are not creating any programmatic action with approval of this plan.

Breeuwer: Indicated that he understands there is no legal authority for programming with approval of this plan, however from a terminology standpoint, correct use of the term would be helpful.

Schmidt: Agreed with Commissioner Breeuwer, and stated that references such as these are often used as arguments or justification at later times, therefore updated terminology would be favorable.

Filby Williams: Confirmed they collaborated with Mr. Fulton to remove and replace this term. Apologized if the correction hadn't been made yet.

Schmidt: Expressed concern about overdevelopment of the area and cautioned Spirit Mountain and Mrs. Ream to keep this in mind. Commended their efforts in creating a multi-use facility to increase revenues. Requested that they pay attention to a changing climate, while stressing the importance of maintenance and accessibility.

**MOTION/Second:** Torch/Edmondson to approve the Spirit Mountain Master Plan. Unanimously approved. Vote: 10/0.



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- B. 2018 Golf Program Budget – Jim Filby Williams, Director of Public Administration, City of Duluth and Mike Bender, General Manager, Billy Casper Golf (informational)

Filby Williams: Thanked Commissioners for the opportunity to speak with them regarding the state of Duluth golf. Introduced Duluth Golf General Manager, Mike Bender. Indicated that City Council approved a budget for 2018 that assumes continuation of two golf courses, and projects an operating loss of \$108,000. Stated that the purpose of tonight's presentation is not to review that budget, rather to provide an overview of the state of Duluth golf and the challenges facing the program. Explained that they plan to tentatively ask for the opportunity to speak again with the Parks Commission and City Council in January, at which time more focus on the potential solutions to these challenges would be provided. Noted that the City of Duluth golf program has a proud 90-year tradition with golf, which began in 1927 with the grand opening of Enger in 1934 and Lester shortly thereafter. Indicated that both courses expanded from eighteen to twenty-four holes and are a valuable part of the Duluth parks and recreation program. Explained that the courses saw their peak in 2006, which is the same time golf peaked in national popularity. Stated that the program has sometimes netted enough to fully finance capital maintenance, however after 2006 there has been a steady decline, with lowered participation and financial losses that approach \$300,000 per year. Explained that this crisis prompted an ongoing effort to turn things around, noting their current contract with Billy Casper Golf, whose expertise in local golf management has allowed them to implement improvements in marketing, food and beverage, turf management and water conservation. Indicated that the projected budget operating loss will not provide an annual profit necessary to restore failing infrastructure. Indicated Duluth golf has two goals; to provide high-quality, reasonably affordable public golf and achieve financial sustainability to pay down the debt and invest in renewal of failing infrastructure. Highlighted the seven challenges Duluth must overcome to meet these goals:

- Participation – declining locally and nationally
- Financial performance – poor financial performance and net loss
- Balance of golf supply and demand – more golf courses nationally than the number of golfers can support, Duluth-area courses struggling with reduced volume and static rates
- Golf infrastructure conditions – severe deterioration of golf course infrastructure that last saw significant investment 30 years ago, approaching a point where implementing Band-Aid solutions to postpone permanent fixes of the irrigation system won't be possible
- Capital requirements – the cost to repair failing systems is estimated to cost approximately \$12.7 million, federal and state grants commonly used for park improvements don't fund golf
- Challenges 1 through 5 amplify each other – first four challenges reinforce each other in a way that may lead to a vicious cycle
- Remaining solutions – many of the potential improvement actions to improve business performance have already been implemented

Edmondson: Questioned what zoning would look like if Lester was sold.

Filby Williams: Stated that currently they are looking at golf from a strictly business manner to see if it can continue to operate as is; however, if the question ends up being no, they will look into what the highest and best use of Lester Park would be. Explained that this decision would require a change in the comprehensive plan and super majority approval by the Planning Commission and City Council,



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which would be necessary steps before rezoning and sale could be considered.

Vogtman: Questioned what the number of rounds played at Enger versus Lester was.

Filby Williams: Stated that its roughly 60/40, with Enger seeing more participation than Lester.

Vogtman: Referenced the City of Superior's golf courses and questioned how they are faring.

Filby Williams: Confirmed that Nemadji has two 18-hole courses and indicated their manager reaches out to the City of Duluth occasionally and communicates the similar difficulty they are having with increasing costs.

Torch: Thanked Mr. Filby Williams for his presentation and indicated there are tough decisions ahead. Questioned what the timeline is to answer questions about the future of golf and whether 2018 would be the year to answer these questions.

Filby Williams: Stated that the direction and timeline the City will follow is yet to be determined.

Crosby: Referenced Nemadji golf course and others in Wisconsin that may be closing and indicated it would be interesting to see how this will affect golf in Duluth.

Schraepfer: Thanked Mr. Filby Williams for the presentation and stated that recreation changes over time, with ups and downs across different generations. Indicated that Duluth has a strong need for housing, and if it did close there may opportunity for the community.

Schmidt: Stated that the situation looks bleak and the challenges ahead are clear. Expressed concern regarding the involvement with stakeholders in coming up with solutions. Questioned what has been done and what plans are ahead for their involvement.

Filby Williams: Confirmed they have not conducted the standard Mini-Master Plan process; instead, the process for engaging users has been unique, limited and ongoing. Stated that in 2011, the National Golf Foundation solicited a study to gather input from users. Indicated that in 2014, prior to public communication, a state of Duluth golf presentation was shared with golf league leaders, before going to City Council. Stated that with this report, they also met with golf leaders to hear their thoughts and concerns.

Schmidt: Questioned if Mr. Filby Williams anticipated further involvement from stakeholders moving forward.

Filby Williams: Stated that a specific plan is not outlined, however engagement with the golf community going forward is foreseeable. Explained that Administration has yet to set parameters around what the planning process should look like and what the level of involvement and public investment will be.

Schmidt: Shared how impressed he is with the stakeholders and golf users in understanding the



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financial state Duluth golf is in and that sacrifice and change is ahead.

Isernhagen: Thanked Mr. Filby Williams for his work and congratulated Mr. Bender on all he has done for the golf course. Stated that its very apparent the Duluth golf community has major problems to overcome, however the courses have been part of the community's history for 90 years. Noted that twenty years ago, Duluth public courses were identified in 1998 as the best public golf courses in the United States. Stated that due to a number of issues, they are in their current state, facing deteriorating courses and clubhouses. Indicated that the solutions that have been presented by City Administration and outside consultants are very sensitive. Referenced his communication with the golf community and their great concern and frustration in response to the solutions presented. Explained that President Schmidt requested he look into the golf situation, and from his research of Duluth and the Twin Cities, he feels strongly there are solutions and opportunities. Questioned what could be done to boost revenue in the wintertime, when the current facilities are not being used. Questioned what could be done to attract tourists. Stated that they need to look into the business decision and determine what can be done to make golf sustainable, and if the conclusion is that two golf courses is not affordable, the remaining golf course must be the best it can be. Proposed a motion that the Parks and Recreation Commission recommended to the Duluth City Council, to direct the Parks and Recreation Division to initiate the development of a business or strategic plan for the operations of the two city-owned golf courses, with significant involvement with the golf community. Indicated the business plan should be presented to the Parks and Recreation Commission and City Council within the next six months.

Schraepfer: Requested Commissioner Isernhagen to clarify what he meant in regards to a business plan.

Isernhagen: Stated that he is not sure exactly what goes into a Master Plan, however the need for engagement with the golf community in this process is important in facilitating a decision.

Westerlund: Referred to Mr. Filby Williams and questioned if he felt the wording of the motion was directing City Council to direct the Parks Division, which sounds a bit outside of the Council's role in directing City staff. Referred to staff's current workload and questioned what their availability in undergoing a strategic planning process for golf would be.

Filby Williams: Thanked Ms. Westerlund for her questions. Referenced the resolution language, stating that minor language adjustments could be made in regards to directing Council, while still fulfilling the intent of the proposed motion. Stated that in regard to staff time, there are currently 11 staff members and setting and maintaining a sustainable work load is important. Indicated that leadership staff would need to shift their focus from one another priority to golf. Indicated they look to the Parks Commission in their advisory role to make this recommendation.

Schmidt: Referenced the motion on the floor and his concern with continued discussion before acknowledging the motion.

Schraepfer: Referred to Parks Staff's current workload and questioned where this would rank on their list of priorities.



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Filby Williams: Confirmed it is an important issue; however, he cannot speak to Mayor Larson's perspective on this. Conveyed his certainty that this will require meaningful input. Referenced the language of the proposed motion and its mention of two golf courses, noting that without knowing what solutions Administration may bring forward, the planning parameters are unclear at this time.

Schmidt: Questioned if changing the wording in regards to two golf courses would change the meaning of the proposed motion.

Isernhagen: Stated that the response he has received from the community is in opposition of consolidating to one golf course and therefore the decision requires more input from the community.

Breeuwer: Requested tabling the motion in order to continue to discuss the topic versus the language.

Schmidt: Questioned Mr. Filby Williams regarding the process of tabling or withdrawing the motion.

Filby Williams: Indicated that while it's important to make a good faith effort to follow Roberts Rules, they should be able to find a workable way to continue the discussion.

Wodash: Questioned if additional studies have been done regarding the potential use of the golf courses for winter recreation.

Filby Williams: Stated that they have consulted with a number of industry experts over the past four years to conceive ways to put the courses on a financially sustainable path. Indicated he has heard from experts that offseason activities would not be a significant business strategy. Explained that generally speaking, Nordic skiing is infamously poor at generating revenue.

Vogtman: Thanked Commissioner Isernhagen and questioned whether Parks staff would provide more information next month. Stated that he would prefer voting on the motion after input from Mayor Larson.

Filby Williams: Indicated that they share interest in the vision to expand the clubhouse and event center, however this requires significant costs.

Schmidt: Referenced the Zoo and how it underwent a similar study that involved primary stakeholders, noting how this process involved the community well.

Breeuwer: Questioned if Enger would have the capacity to maintain numbers if Lester ever had to be closed.

Bender: Confirmed with site improvements, Enger could handle the capacity.

Edmondson: Questioned if the estimated value of Lester would be enough to cover the \$12 million in improvements necessary.



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Filby Williams: Stated that projected net income would not cover the cost of all necessary maintenance and capital improvements.

David Anderson (public): Stated that he was raised around golf and cannot believe what he is hearing tonight. Indicated that this is a real opportunity for the Parks Commission to preserve one of the nicest parks in Duluth. Explained that golf is a National past time, and stated there is opportunity for better signage and advertisement of both courses. Indicated that both parking lots are near full capacity during the golf season. Urged Commissioners to preserve both courses. Noted his visit to Theodore Worth Park in Minneapolis that has year round activities, and how this could be mimicked in Duluth.

Tim McEvoy (public): Stated that selling Lester Golf Course has been discussed for the past ten years, however there are currently 21 properties for sale surrounding that area, with only four selling in the past five years. Explained that it is currently difficult to get a tee time on Friday, Saturday or Sunday, therefore he cannot imagine going to one course. Indicated there is a great deal of opportunity for the land.

Breeuwer: Referenced community partners such as Duluth Cross Country Ski Club and the Climbers Coalition, whom have done a great job organizing and planning fundraising campaigns. Questioned if there was an opportunity for the golf community to organize amongst themselves to provide a more unified point of contact and potential fundraising. Questioned what the per user support from the City is in regards to golf.

Filby Williams: Stated that the proposition that golf is deserving of an ongoing subsidy in the same way other activities do is a challenge. Indicated they welcome dialogue about the appropriateness of providing subsidy and to what magnitude.

Breeuwer: Stated that he would like to see a comparison, as how we subsidize one activity versus another and what that means to the community is important.

Filby Williams: Explained that City Council approved a budget that assumes operation of two courses, however, Administration has kept the door open to the possibility of considering options in January that may depart from this assumption.

Vogtman: Questioned what Billy Casper Golf's involvement is with this proposed business plan.

Filby Williams: Stated that it is within their scope to provide an annual business plan, however the plan that Commissioner Isernhagen is requesting is beyond their scope.

Schmidt: Redirected Commissioners back to the motion open on the floor.

Schraepfer: Seconded Commissioner Isernhagen's motion.

Torch: Referenced roles within City government and recommended changing the language from "direct" to "ask", thus changing the language to say the City Council would "ask" the Parks and



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Recreation Division to develop a plan.

Filby Williams: Confirmed it would suffice to change the word direct to ask, while staying within the City Charter.

Breeuwer: Expressed disagreement with the last line of the resolution that puts a deadline on the plan, noting that this deadline may be counterproductive to a robust community engagement process. Stated that if the resolution is intended to promote community engagement, then the hard timeline is counterproductive.

Isernhagen: Expressed opinion that six months is a healthy timeline.

Schmidt: Indicated the timeline provides accountability, noting that the motion does not say the presentation needs to be a complete plan, rather a presentation of the plan.

**MOTION/Second:** Commissioner Isernhagen motioned that the Parks and Recreation Commission recommend to the Duluth City Council, to ask the Parks and Recreation Division to initiate the development of a business or strategic plan for the operations of the two city-owned golf courses, with significant involvement with the golf community, with a presentation to City Council and the Parks Commission within six months. Seconded by Commissioner Schraepfer. Vote: 9/0. Breeuwer abstained from vote.

### V. Commission Committees

A. Parks and Facilities – meeting date: TBA

Chair - Michael Schraepfer – John Schmidt, Dean Vogtman, Dennis Isernhagen [Dale Sellner]

B. Administrative (E-Board) – meeting date: Wednesday, December 20 at noon in the Parks office

Chair – John Schmidt – Erik Torch, Amanda Crosby [Cheryl Skaffe]

C. Trails and Bikeways – meeting date: TBD

Chair – Tjaard Breeuwer– Tiersa Wodash, Britt Rohrbaugh, Dudley Edmondson, Dean Vogtman, Art Johnston, Mike Casey, Eric Viken, Shawna Mullen [Andy Holak]

D. Recreation Programming (youth and adult) – meeting date: TBA

Chair - Erik Torch - Amanda Crosby, Dudley Edmondson, Kristin Bergerson [Pamela Page]

### VI. Commissioner & Liaison Reports

### VII. New Business

### VIII. Old Business

### IX. Division Manager's Report

Roche: Referend the report he emailed Commissioners last night and stated this will be used to empower them with more information. Stated that if further elaboration is needed, he requested Commissioners contact him. Provided update on the Western Waterfront Park and Trail Mini-Master





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Plan and stated that the two questions staff are working on are yet to be answered.

## X. Public Comment

Denette Lynch (public): Referenced the Division Manager's report and stated that having requested access to a copy as its helpful in getting an idea of what is going on in parks.

Roche: Confirmed that copies are on the back table and will be available at meetings going forward.

Isernhagen: Referenced the copy of Duluth's Historic Parks that is at each commissioner's station, and indicated this is a gift to the Commission from Tony Dierckins.

## XI. Adjournment

Meeting adjourned at 7:13 pm. Moved by Commissioner Torch. Second by Commissioner Vogtman.

## XII. Next Meeting

The next meeting will be Wednesday January 10, 2017 at 5pm in Room 303 at Duluth City Hall.