

Belmont Community Input Meeting
April 16, 2019
Question and Answer Discussion Summary

Question ***Can the Board of Supervisors make the decision to turn Belmont into an apartment complex?***

The County Manager relayed that the citizen was referring to a story back from the fall in a local news publication covering a proposal that came to us from the private sector as part of a completely separate facility discussion. Henrico County has no intent to redevelop Belmont and use the property for anything other than a public park. The county moved immediately to make that position clear as soon as the story came out, and Henrico County did not entertain any discussions whatsoever related to that particular private sector proposal.

Question ***We've been told that these meetings are supposed to be is non-confrontational, but I disagree. There are now different factions in our community expressing clear animosity towards one another. Does the County realize there is a direct correlation between use and condition of a golf course? Why has money for bunker repairs not been used? Has anyone talked to golf experts to get a cost benefit analysis?***

The County Manager said there was approximately \$360,000 allocated for the bunkers, and, even though it has not been spent, it is still there and available. He then asked the Director of Recreation and Parks to provide additional background.

The Recreation and Parks Director shared that the funds to repair all 71 sand bunkers was allocated in the 2017 fiscal year budget. This was a much-needed maintenance project, and we were ready to proceed with securing a contractor that fall to complete the refurbishment and have new white sand and properly-draining bunkers by the spring of 2018. However, a small group of golfers came forward at the last minute with a vocal concern that no bunker repair or maintenance should proceed until impacts to the historic design of the course were considered. That group was also adamant that we needed to retain the services of a golf architect specializing in historic course renovations. Based on the sudden opposition to this maintenance project, we held a community meeting here in this very building to hear input from golfers. This was also just prior to our first larger-picture discussion about Belmont with the Board of Supervisors at their January 2018 retreat. With that convergence, the decision was made to suspend the bunker work to allow time for more clarity over the entire golf course discussion.

The County Manager reiterated that these capital funds are still available and, as part of this community conversation, the bunker renovation option is entirely open and on-the-table.

The Recreation and Parks Director continued to explain the recent process by which the County solicited private sector golf expertise to potentially take over golf operations at Belmont. In the summer of 2018, Henrico County opened a Request for Information to solicit proposals from the private sector to operate the golf course as a business operation. Through that process, and in reviewing information from six operators who provided proposals, we affirmed business challenges at Belmont already recognized and understood.

Henrico County and Belmont do not currently have access to other non-golf revenue opportunities that comparable private courses depend upon in today's challenging golf market.

Without the sale of alcohol, our food and beverage revenue numbers are poor, and we are not attractive for group or corporate outings. We also recognize that condition issues like the bunkers and poorly-draining pushup clay greens contribute to customer retention challenges. 50% of Belmont customers across all categories played the course only once in the past year.

All the proposals also identified the need to make substantial capital reinvestment in the course in order to remain competitive. The timing of this privatization exploration again came around to coincide with the Board's second retreat in January 2019. Belmont golf course was again a presentation topic for discussion. The option to turn Belmont over to a private operator is still a possibility, but we suspended further negotiations under the 2018 process until we could come to the point where we are today, and in the months to come, in discussing bigger-picture questions and feedback regarding Belmont with the community.

Statement *Another comment was made that fixing the bunkers would surely encourage more rounds of play.*

The Director acknowledged the bunkers need to be fixed structurally and reiterated that the project money is available.

Question *Why was funding put into stream restoration?*

The County Manager answered that that project was a storm water improvement project managed through the Department of Public Works and entirely unrelated to Belmont or Belmont golf course funding. The County is required to reduce the amount of nutrients flushing into its waterways as part of its municipal storm water permit. That two-year stream project was part of larger and mandated efforts by Henrico County to improve the water quality of the Chesapeake Bay. We will continue to put funding into stream restoration efforts, but in this instance, it had nothing to do with the course itself.

Question *If the primary concern is revenue loss, what have you considered that would enhance revenue?*

The Manager responded that we are taking all the suggestions expressed this evening into consideration as possibilities to improve revenue generation. These include a 9-hole rate, allowing the sale of alcohol, and renovating the sand bunkers.

Supervisor Schmitt added that he is in the Lakeside community a lot. The reason everyone is here tonight is the same, and that is because we all want the best for our community. He said he is listening to all the input but stressed that Henrico County is capable of doing more than one thing at a time.

Statement *Petersburg runs a very nice golf course, Dogwood Trace. It covers all of its operating expenses. The money situation at Belmont shouldn't be a factor in this decision. Other parks do not bring in revenue.*

The Manager responded that the Petersburg course actually does lose money on an annual basis. (The following document is the financial history of Dogwood Trace Golf Course as published in the City of Petersburg financial information.)

Dogwood Trace Golf Course Financial History*

| | Revenue | Expense | Profit / Loss | General Fund Transfer to Golf Fund |
|---------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------------|---|
| 2008* | \$ 188,080 | \$ 622,377 | \$ (434,297) | |
| 2009* | \$ 565,943 | \$ 1,176,452 | \$ (610,509) | |
| 2010* | \$ 599,448 | \$ 1,182,589 | \$ (583,141) | |
| 2011* | \$ 818,562 | \$ 1,127,133 | \$ (308,571) | |
| 2012* | \$ 683,792 | \$ 1,151,540 | \$ (467,748) | |
| 2013* | \$ 709,000 | \$ 1,110,021 | \$ (401,021) | |
| 2014* | \$ 709,000 | \$ 1,203,286 | \$ (494,286) | \$ 241,273 |
| 2015* | \$ 694,111 | \$ 1,256,939 | \$ (562,828) | |
| 2016* | \$ 703,735 | \$ 1,186,181 | \$ (482,446) | \$ 248,219 |
| 2017* | \$ 674,319 | \$ 969,240 | \$ (294,921) | |
| <u>2018**</u> | <u>\$ 737,657</u> | <u>\$ 731,010</u> | <u>\$ 6,647</u> | <u>\$ 292,850</u> |
| Total | \$ 7,083,647 | \$ 11,716,768 | \$ (4,633,121) | \$ 782,342 |

In FY2007, Petersburg issued capital debt of \$2,435,727 to fund golf course renovations.

In FY2007, also made a \$268,000 budget increase in General Fund for associated golf expenses by parks and recreation department.

Total cumulative debt obligation incurred by Petersburg for golf course is \$4,140,000.

In FY2014 and FY2016, General Fund contributed to Golf Fund to reduce operating loss.

In FY2018, capital debt was restructured so the debt payment made by the General Fund to the Golf Fund.

*Source of documentation: *City of Petersburg Comprehensive Annual Financial Report* for fiscal years 2007-2018

**Source of documentation: *City of Petersburg FY 2018-2019 Adopted Budget*

Question

My husband and I moved to Lakeside a few years ago. I realize this may be an unpopular opinion in this room tonight. I've seen the signs that say to keep golf in Lakeside. However, if I pull up golf online, another golf course comes up within a mile. If the response is, well, that golf course is not affordable, then I understand. But, if there is already golf in Lakeside, what things are not in Lakeside? There is not a public park, there is not a dog park, there is not a place where there could be live music or outdoor weddings. I am a public teacher, and my students come to play at this course because it is affordable. I love that. But, I kind of want to turn the conversation towards some other options. If I want to take my dog to a dog park where there is a section for small and medium dogs, I have to go to Short Pump. I would love to have more park options here in our own community because Lakeside is awesome.

The County Manager discussed the number of rounds, and the individual golfers that play those rounds. When you look at the number of golfers from Henrico County that use the course, last year, considering the rainy weather and the stream construction project, there were approximately 2,700 Henrico County residents who played Belmont. If Belmont were a more typical Henrico County park, that individual patron and overall visitation number would be perhaps 100 times higher. He thanked the speaker for having the courage to come forward with her ideas and thoughts. We are here tonight to listen and appreciate and value all input and perspectives.

Statement

Another citizen replied that there is a dog park where the trailer park used to be.

The Recreation and Parks Director stated that the former trailer park was acquired in 2009 and, although immediately adjacent to Belmont, is not part of the course property itself. That property was discussed with the community in a process very much like this, and the Board ultimately adopted a master plan for the property, Brook Road Neighborhood Park. It is currently maintained as open space with a very small gravel parking area off of Brook Road. Like the Lakeside Little League park at the end of Club Road, Brook Road Neighborhood Park is not part of the Belmont golf course but is also part of this larger discussion.

Mr. Schmitt commended the resident for speaking up. Just because a resident wants a dog park near their home, or some other community amenity, it doesn't mean that they are also against golfing or the golf course. He said he admired the speaker for coming forward tonight to do what we all the residents in this room are here to do, which is to ask their Supervisor to listen to each individual concern. That is what we are doing, and that is what everyone in the room is doing. It is not golf against dog park. We can do multiple things.

Statement

There are many County parks in Henrico. We should be proud to have a golf course in our portfolio for tourism. Having a golf course in Henrico completes the County.

Question

When the course was making money, why wasn't any thought put into marketing the course? Maybe you could take another look at selling alcohol.

The Manager said these were both good suggestions. He also stated that Henrico County does have an effort called "Visit Henrico" that is focused on ways to promote all of Henrico County to potential visitors. He said that we absolutely can look at ways to better market the golf course.

Question ***Why are we all here? Who brought up the idea to make a change to Belmont?***

The Manager said he wanted to make sure we cover that question 100%. First, there is no proposed change in the land use for Belmont. There are no commercial or residential uses; nothing other than keeping 118 acres of public green space. Second, to the question of why we are here discussing this, that question came forward from your County Manger. If you go back the past 10 years, the cumulative loss by Belmont over that period is 2.2 million dollars.

We are running somewhere around a \$200,000 per year deficit, and rainy weather years make it worse. The history clearly tells us we are on a downward trajectory. The cumulative effect of all those deficits means your property tax and real estate taxes are subsidizing the golf course.

I see these financial results, and, as your County Manager, it would be irresponsible of me not to address this as a concern. I've heard suggestions about putting the course under the general fund. I have been your financial official for many years and will say that is not a good idea.

Question ***Why isn't the thought process about introspection and about what you may have done wrong?***

The Manager added that we are here because he started a conversation with the Board of Supervisors. The Board will adopt a budget this coming Tuesday (April 23) that makes no change to the operation of Belmont for fiscal 2019-20. However, we need to recognize that this also needs to be addressed for the long-term. If we know we have a financial issue as a government and we don't do anything about it, who have we become? You can blame me.

Statement ***David Brown introduced himself as living in the original Hermitage club house for 47 years. He stated that maintenance of the course has gone down. Trees have died and have not been replaced, and there are very few flowers. There are 18,552 courses in American and only 82 that have held PGA Championships, and this is one of them. This is our Notre Dame. This is a jewel and should be marketed as such.***

Mr. Thornton said that he heard the word "introspection" mentioned earlier. He said that is exactly what we are doing. He also heard the constructive criticism as well as the blame, that's been expressed this evening. He then went on to say that we need to leave blame alone and go forward. Nothing is perfect, but we have a love of golf and a love of sport. Let's have constructive criticism and go forward. He offered to those persons who have been critical, you don't want to run your home in a deficit. I'll take some blame. Let's move forward and make it better.

Question ***How much would it cost to convert Belmont into a Deep Run or Meadow Farm?***

The Director stated that is a difficult question to answer because citizens would first need to decide what they want to do with the property. We have run some cost comparisons, and the cost varies depending on the types of facilities you have. Areas with more active recreation require more care and are more expensive to maintain. A golf course is actually one of the most maintenance intensive land uses you can have. On average, sixty cents of every dollar earned by any golf course goes immediately back into the cost of keeping the grass green and maintained properly for play. Ultimately, assigning a cost really depends on what the community decides that they want to have in their park.

Question *I've been resident for ten years and agree we need to figure out how to make this not cost money. What programs have we put in place to alleviate the deficit? What about wedding rentals to create revenue?*

The Manager responded that this is exactly what the conversation this evening is all about.

The Director then explained that the Belmont Recreation Center is not part of the enterprise operation of the golf course. The center, where we are meeting this evening, and the tennis courts are part of the department's general fund responsibilities. Only the operation of the golf course is booked under enterprise fund. Even though it's all on the same property, it was decided long ago that the golf course was to be self-supporting and designated into an enterprise fund. A decision was made that the other parks and recreation services we provide, as a service and value to the community. Unlike Belmont Golf Course, there is no cost recovery target for those services.

Question *Does it make business sense to have the course separated from the clubhouse?*

The Manager replied that this building is a recreation center based on a decision made by the Board at the time the property was acquired in the late 1970s. He added that the center actually benefits the golf course because it is a well-maintained asset that does not detract from the entire property. As a general fund supported operation, Belmont Recreation Center gets used for number of community functions unrelated to golf.

Statement *I don't have anything against golf. I support the obvious passion for golf evident in this room. However, I suggest that this community also needs more open, safe, and well-lit areas for cycling and running. As a family, we do a lot of that.*

The Manager mentioned that Henrico County is exploring the feasibility of converting the old trolley trail between Ashland and Richmond into a multiuse trail. That old trolley line ran through the front nine of Belmont, so any future trail configuration will be in close proximity to Belmont.

Statement *That is a really cool idea.*

Statement *It was mentioned earlier that 2,700 Henrico residents played golf at last year. That translated to about 10,000 hours of recreation, and that is a lot.*

Statement *I've been a resident for 68-years and am a golfer. I am not a tennis player, but Belmont has some of the best tennis courts anywhere. Anyone coming from anywhere can play those courts for free. Maybe those tennis players should have to pay a fee. If you are not a County resident, you certainly should be paying. There are ways for Belmont to make money, such as bringing back the men's association.*

Statement *In any relationship, marriage, friendship, or community, sometimes we start taking each other for granted. We forget how precious the thing is that is the closest to us. Sometimes we need to be reminded of that. Belmont is one those things, and I am grateful for the opportunity to bring it to the foreground of this community. It may be that this scenario isn't either this or that. There are people advocating for the golf course, and I am one of those, but that doesn't exclude other people and other possibilities. We need to keep everything on the table, including this facility. I encourage the group to think outside the box and embrace the folks,*

like the young lady that spoke very courageously, how do we encourage cohabitation of this property that is gorgeous? The only reason people want access is because it is gorgeous! We have taken Belmont for granted. Our group has been mining some data and found about 19,000 golfers have been here over the last 5 years. Over the last 5 years, individuals have come from 48 states to golf at Belmont. It is a tourist destination.

Statement ***We moved to Lakeside about 5 years ago. I don't play golf. The golf course is a great neighbor. I love Lakeside and am a huge cheerleader for my neighborhood. Lakeside is about gardens and golf, antiques and drinking. Come to Lakeside. Build the bike path along Route 1. Let's embrace all ways to bring people to the Lakeside community. I love the golf course but also dog parks, bike paths, and parks.***

Statement ***I am a physician, a brain and spine specialist, and am running for Three Chopt supervisor. When you look at disease, it gets worse over time. The problems with Belmont started years ago, and at this point they have only gotten worse. Now, let's find some hard medication and get a cure. This is a discussion that is happening. I suggest hosting the 2049 PGA Championship at Belmont. What a great way to promote sports tourism. In 2016, voters approved a huge bond referendum with a good amount for parks and tourism. Golf is a sport. Let's put Belmont under the General Fund and a part of the 2049 PGA Tour.***

Question ***My husband and I have lived on Hilliard for over 40 years. We are not golfers but enjoy the aesthetics of the property and would like to see more people able to use the course for walking paths or bike trails. We used the recreation center for our 50th wedding anniversary, and it's a great facility. I appreciate this meeting as a means to clear up some items of concern. You mentioned 2,700 residents used the golf course last year. What percentage of our population is that?***

The Manager responded that 335,000 people live in Henrico County, and we see an average visitation in our major parks between 200,000 – 300,000 users annually.

Question ***So, the residents of Henrico County are not being able to utilize this whole property? If you play golf, that is great. We would like to see some walking paths. We would like to have walking groups, but the golf course is off-limits. We would like to see that changed so some groups could walk the paths. We would also like to see bike paths increase. If you come to Lakeside on the 4th of July, you will see all the flags that my husband and my children put out. We want our community to grow, and we want to utilize it and put the funds to best use.***

The Manager responded that this is why we are having this conversation. Ultimately, we can do something a little differently with Belmont. The decision absolutely comes from the people. This is a special community. We have people here like the Franciscos who have done so many things over the years to make improvements to Lakeside in general. This is a special community. Lakeside has beautiful homes and great people. Henrico County is not looking to do harm to anyone's property in any way. We are using this process that we have started to make it better, or incorporate more, into the Belmont property. There are two more meeting opportunities like this one in the weeks to come.

Question

I do not golf, but I do believe when you have such a beautiful treasure, something as historic as this golf course, it needs to be considered very carefully. I think this is a great part of that process so everyone can have a say. Another thought, I know that some grants were used to build a bike trail from Richmond to Williamsburg. Maybe we could find some additional grants for a dog park or bike lanes so more of the needs of everyone can be met and everyone can feel like they have had a voice and have been heard today?

The Manager responded that sounds exactly like a master plan

Question

I have lived her for close to 20 years and am facing the golf course. I appreciate Henrico County for having this meeting because it is needed. What about the park behind J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College? There is a ballfield and a track. How much is it used, and can it be converted for some of the activities suggested here this evening.

The Director replied that the property referenced belongs to the Commonwealth. It is part of the community college campus and controlled by the community college board. Henrico County has made improvements over the years under an agreement with the community college board. Any changes would require state permission.

Statement

I've lived in the County for almost 30 years. This is my first home after graduating from high school. I grew up very poor, and golf was not an option. Belmont provides an opportunity for kids to play golf who might otherwise not be able to play because golf is so expensive. I think a 9-hole option should be considered. I'm also very concerned about the property being turned into a development.

The County Manager and both Mr. Thornton and Mr. Schmitt reiterated that Belmont will not become a commercial or residential development. It is a park and will remain a park.

The Manager added that the summary of this question and answer session will be available for review by the date of the next meeting. The next two meetings will be adjusted to provide the question and answer format that we've conducted this evening.

Statement

I worked for Chesterfield for 18 years. We are fortunate here in Henrico. The options we had in Chesterfield was First Tee. I'm concerned about the analogy of Belmont usage to that of the other parks in Henrico county. People use those parks for free. At Belmont, golf is a totally different sport, and you have to pay. You should be careful with that analogy.

Question

Thank you for saying there will be no condos or other development. You said 2,700 Henrico residents play at Belmont and over 100,00 visit other County parks. How many parks do we have in Henrico County?

The Manager clarified that 2,700 is the number of Henrico County residents that played golf at Belmont last year. The total number of individual players was about 6,000.

The Director added that Henrico County has 41 open and active parks. We track visitation in our 5 major parks with traffic counters. These parks are getting 200,000 – 500,000 visitors per park annually. We also track our facility reservations in our recreation centers with our registration software system.

Mr. Thornton concluded the meeting by thanking everyone in attendance. He said that each of you could have been doing something else, but you are here because this discussion affects you.

There are groups of people that say Belmont is a gem. This is our Notre Dame. We are going to shine and embellish it. Let's go forward to be inclusive. We want the best. I am for community. There are two other public input meetings in the coming weeks. This is democracy in action. We are taking the time to do it and are listening first. Please come back April 30 and May 6.