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Golf's popularity wanes □ city rethinking options

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Fewer golfers are hitting the links now compared to 10 years ago despite the fact there are more courses, private and public, to play on than ever before.

With a reduced number of people golfing, cities that run public golf courses are grappling with how to keep them open in the down economy.

San Francisco supervisors recently voted to turn the city-owned Sharp Park Golf Course in Pacifica over to the National Park Service as a cost-saving measure but that decision was recently vetoed by new Mayor Ed Lee.

In San Mateo, the city's Park and Recreation Commission will discuss the fate of the Poplar Creek Golf Course at Coyote Point at a meeting next week before the full council takes up the topic at a study session later in January.

The commission will consider a range of options at the meeting that could increase revenue for the course, which first opened in 1933.

Since Poplar Creek reopened in 2000, annual paid rounds have decreased 26 percent and revenue has declined 11 percent, according to a staff report to the commission.

The staff report shows demand has decreased, supply has increased, average incomes have declined while the price to golf has increased and the five hours needed to play a round is increasingly becoming a barrier to golf.

Poplar Creek is still one of the busier golf courses in California, according to the staff report, despite a huge decline in annual paid rounds the past two years.

Without a promise the industry will return to former levels of play, many municipalities are considering current levels of play as the "new normal," according to the staff report.

In fiscal year 2000-01, total revenue at Poplar Creek was nearly \$2.7 million but that number has since dropped to \$2.4 million for fiscal year 2010-11. Expenses, however, have remained relatively flat over the last decade, according to the staff report.

The golf course has generated sufficient revenue to cover its operating expenses, capital outlay, indirect costs fee and debt service. It still relies on the city's general fund, however, to survive, according to the staff report.

To raise revenue, the city will consider opening up its residential rates to all San Mateo County residents since resident rounds have decreased to a level where they now account for only 17 percent of the total rounds played at Poplar Creek. The number of city resident golf card holders has fallen to 600 from a high of nearly 2,000, according to the staff report.

The city is also considering the development of a full practice range at the seventh hole to generate about \$300,000 annually. It would cost, however, \$500,000 to construct, which would come out of San Mateo's general fund.

Tee-time policies are also under review and the course could allow golfers to play as fivesomes, according to the staff report.

The San Mateo Park and Recreation Commission meets 7:30 p.m., Wednesday, Jan. 4, City Hall, 330 W. 20th Ave., San Mateo.