

THE VANCOUVER SUN

Surrey wants to turn golf course into a marsh

Ken Poirier says city move will take away 'popular facility'

BY KELLY SINOSKI, VANCOUVER SUN OCTOBER 28, 2015



Ken Poirier, owner of Riverside Golf Course, poses for a photo on his golf course in Surrey, BC, October, 23, 2015. The city of Surrey is expropriating land belonging to the Riverside Golf Course, which has been running for 50 years, to create a freshwater swamp.

Photograph by: RICHARD LAM , PNG

The owner of a South Surrey golf course that's been operating for 50 years is mystified as to why the city wants to shut him down and turn his property into a freshwater marsh.

Ken Poirier was told a few months ago that the city planned to expropriate 16 acres from his nine-hole Riverside Golf course to extend Crescent Road from King George Boulevard to Winter Crescent while the rest of the land would be used as a conservation area.

"They've done it at lightning speed," Poirier said. "They've pushed it through and taken the title and put the proverbial gun to our heads."

Poirier said the city has given him until the end of January to shutter the business that's been in the family for decades. He claims the situation has outraged many residents, with close to 1,000 signing a petition against the expropriation.

Poirier had hoped to present the petition to council next month but has now been told by the city he can't do that because the issue is before the courts, which he said is "even more outrageous."

"Pretty much everyone in the city I talk to is outraged at the city's actions," Poirier said. "Everyone says this is like park here, it's gorgeous. Retired people ... some of them come here three to five times a week; they get most of their physical activity here."

Poirier acknowledges chances are slim he will get to keep his property because the city's request to extend Crescent Road is a "linear expropriation," which means he can't challenge it.

Mark Underhill, who oversaw an inquiry into the matter, also ruled in favour of the expropriation by accepting the city's argument that the creation of a park isn't feasible on an alternative site or by reducing the number of acres.

Poirier, who recently sold off two smaller pieces of the property that are now in the process of being developed, wonders if that triggered the city's push to take his land.

The city is offering Poirier \$200,000 an acre for his property, amounting to about \$3.2 million. The golf course is assessed at \$2 million, according to BC Assessment, but Poirier believes it's worth much more than that, being one of the last large pieces of property in South Surrey. He has commissioned a "comprehensive evaluation" of the land, which he expects will be done in the next few weeks.

City officials declined to comment, saying it's a legal matter, but parks manager Owen Croy told the inquiry in April that the city needs the property to extend its greenways, a network of walking and cycling paths intended to get the growing population engaged in "passive recreation" and viewing of wildlife.

The golf course is next to the Nikomekl River, which has a low-level diking system, while the extended road would allow for movement of traffic, emergency vehicles and pedestrians.

Croy also acknowledged to the inquiry that the city's goal is to preserve natural conservation areas with a minimum size of 20 to 50 hectares and noted it's "difficult to acquire properties with this optimal size in today's world."

Poirier agreed he has an “unusual property,” but questioned why the city would want to close his business — which offers active recreation as well as wildlife viewing of deer and coyotes — for a swamp, especially with the much larger Serpentine Fen nearby.

“The people already get an active view of our park-like setting. They’re going to take away our popular facility to put in a swamp,” he said. “It makes no sense when you think of the city’s actions being for the people. This is going to shorten my father’s life. He’s going to have to watch them rip out his life’s work.”

The move comes as Ontario-based Glen Abbey, one of the most famous golf courses in Canada, proposes to redevelop its land into residential lots. ClubLink Corp. wants to close the golf course and turn the 230-acre area into a development with 3,000 homes.

But that doesn’t appear to be happening at Metro Vancouver courses. Although Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson suggested in 2012 he would consider redeveloping a portion of the Langara Golf Course into residential, the park board said Wednesday there are no plans to rezone that course or the other two city-owned courses at Fraserview and McCleery. Burnaby, which also has two publicly owned golf courses, said they will also remain designated as parks, while other courses, such as Westwood Plateau, said it has no intention of applying for rezoning to residential, noting such a move would likely take years to happen.

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