

Kingston

Is it time for Ontario cities to get out of the golf business?

Demand for city-operated golf courses is declining and some municipalities are wondering if that land should be used for something else

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Kingston's municipal golf course closed at the end of last season, Ottawa handed its public course over to a private company, and Toronto's five courses are under review. (iStock.com/Ramsay)

KINGSTON — When the spring thaw melts the snow over Belle Park Fairways, Kingston's city-operated golf course for more than 40 years, no one will be landscaping the tee blocks or manicuring its greens in preparation for the golf season.

That's because after four years of discussion and examination, the city decided to permanently close the nine-hole course. And despite more than four decades of operation, not to mention its close proximity to the downtown core, it seems few people in the city will miss it.

Kingston's decision to shutter the course comes as other communities in Ontario re-evaluate their involvement in the sport. Ottawa abandoned golf altogether when it privatized its public course in 2014. Toronto council recently voted to move forward with a review of its own city-operated golf courses. As demographics shift, and the popularity of the sport stagnates, Ontario cities are weighing whether golf belongs on their menu of recreational services, or if the resources should be redirected toward outdoor activities with rising as opposed to sinking popularity.

"Our goal in terms of providing recreational amenities is: How do we get the most amount of people using the site to its fullest potential?" says Adam McCluskey, manager of recreational facilities for the City of Kingston.



Kingston's Belle Park Fairways will be closed for more than the winter. (David Rockne Corrigan)

Trashy beginnings

Belle Park Fairways, referred to by locals as “The Dump” because it was built on top of a municipal landfill in 1974, did not exactly go out on a high note.

The 2017 golf season was sadly abbreviated to just four days, due to record levels of precipitation that ravaged golf courses throughout eastern Ontario and left much of Belle Park Fairways underwater. (City officials then had to deal with the carp that spawned in the shallow waters of the flooded course.)

As water levels receded, it became clear to the city that significant damage had been done to the course. The city consulted a golf course designer, who estimated the cost of repairs would be more than \$500,000. With that price tag, it made the decision to close the course more urgent, if not much easier.

“Because it's a landfill ... the ground's still moving,” McCluskey explains. The terrain is lumpy, and shifts. “Even if we were able we were to magically flatten the whole thing out, maybe it would last six months, maybe the next year, then half of it would be unsteady again.”

New, unintended water hazards were not the course's only problem in recent years. Membership numbers have been trending down since 2010, making it increasingly difficult to justify the roughly \$200,000 operational deficit the course ran each year. In 2016, for example, the course had just 66 members. And the rained-out 2017 season, the course officially had zero members on its books.

Bigger cities face the same hazard

Scott Moffatt knows the golf industry. In addition to working at a number of golf courses, he was an operations manager at a Golf Town, the chain of shops familiar to any diehard golf enthusiast. He's also an Ottawa city councillor.

Shortly after being elected to council, Moffatt joined the board of what was then known as Pine View Municipal Golf Course, the only course operated by the City of Ottawa. Though he got involved with the intention of improving the course for its users, he soon realized it was not worth it for the city to be in the golf business at all. “It came down to competitors,” Moffatt says. “Why is the city in this business when there are so many private businesses in the same market?”

Ottawa's tourism website boasts that the city is a "golfer's dream destination, with what many claim is more golf courses per capita within easy driving distance of downtown than any other Canadian city — and most in North America."

Whether or not that claim is accurate, Moffatt felt it his duty to push for the city to hand over its course to a private operator, which ultimately happened in 2014. He says it was definitely the right decision. "We were losing money every year ... The intent of a municipal golf course is to offer something to residents that you can't get otherwise."

Despite the abundance of golf courses in the Ottawa Valley, Moffatt says that golf's popularity is waning in general. While the fame of Tiger Woods may have sparked a golf boom in the 1990s, Moffatt says things have slowed down since then. Research prepared by the National Allied Golf Associations — an umbrella group of other Canadian golf associations, which tries to promote the sport — [confirms that the game faces some vulnerabilities](#).

"Your core people are still there. They never left. But there aren't as many new people being attracted to the sport. That has a big impact," he says. "It's surprising me so far that we haven't seen [private] golf courses close in Ottawa. But I think you'll see it happen. ... I don't think there's enough revenue out there to sustain all the courses that we do have."

Toronto, for its part, recently directed its Parks, Forestry and Recreation department to review its city-run golf courses — that report is expected in 2019. The city may have a large enough population to support its five city-run golf courses for the time being, but it also has a dwindling supply of land on which to build housing.

Pickles in the rough

Kingston's Belle Park will no longer be home to a nine-hole course, but its driving range will live on through 2018, as will the practice green. There is even talk of building a "pitch and putt" course, which is typically much shorter than a regular course, and would require much less space than the park's current golf course layout.

The golf course that was once a garbage dump — and was a settlement and burial ground for Huron people before that — will now morph into something else. In fact, the site could possibly be home to several things. The city will convert much of the former golf course land back to a more "natural" state (which of course will present its own unique challenges as the site of a former landfill). And to address the recreational needs of the community it serves, two sports are under consideration for future homes at Belle Park: rugby and pickleball.

Staff are in discussions with the Kingston Panthers Rugby Club, which makes its own compelling case for permanent facilities at Belle Park. John Clark, who's been involved with the club since 1984, makes a case for his sport: "Kingston Panthers Rugby has

been in the city since 1967. Last year was our 50th anniversary ... We're the largest club in eastern Ontario. And we don't have a permanent home."

Clark is thrilled to see that a long-time dream of the local rugby community could soon become a reality. It would also allow the city to host more tournaments and international matches, which he believes would further cultivate an interest in rugby in Kingston.

"We're growing and thriving, but we're running into space constraints in Kingston and we need a place to call home," says Clark. "When you have a home, you grow."



An August 2017 pickleball game at Kingston's Belle Park. Local pickleball players hope for dedicated pickleball courts there in the future. (Facebook/Kingston Pickleball Club)

Also vying for the space are devotees of pickleball, a sport with a growing following. Already played on the park's multi-purpose courts in the summer months, pickleball can be described as a combination of tennis, badminton, and ping pong. Its Kingston devotees are hoping for their own dedicated courts at Belle Park. And so far, the city is receptive. Staff have been directed to "explore partnership models" with the Kingston Pickleball Association.

Kelli McRobert, a member of the association (she's also on the board of directors for Pickleball Canada) says she got hooked by the social element of pickleball. "We all bring lawn chairs. Snacks. It's a lot of fun. You start to really develop relationships with fellow players."

She had never been to Belle Park before she played pickleball.

“I was not saddened to hear the golf course is closing. Quite honestly, I didn't even know it existed.”

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