

Golf Canada CEO defends public courses after Toronto mayoral candidate Jennifer Keesmaat threatens closures

By John Chidley-Hill *The Canadian Press*

Laurence Applebaum couldn't help but take it personally when [Toronto mayoral candidate Jennifer Keesmaat](#) proposed shutting down some of the city's public courses.

It didn't just bother Applebaum as CEO of Golf Canada, it bugged him because Toronto's public courses are where he first fell in love with the game. When he was 12 his older brother took him to play his first-ever round at Don Valley Golf Course, which has been tabbed by Keesmaat for redevelopment along with Scarlett Woods and Dentonia Park.

"I would never have said I had a home course, I'd say I had a TTC (Toronto Transit Commission) course," Applebaum said Friday. "Take the bus up to Don Valley or take the bus south on (Victoria) Park to the Pharmacy-Warden area to play Tam O'Shanter (another public course).

"Those are the places I was able to afford and get on."

Keesmaat recently made a campaign promise that if elected, she would close three of Toronto's five public golf courses and convert the land to public spaces that are open year-round for no fee. An adult's green fee for an 18-hole round on a public course in Toronto currently ranges from \$27 to \$70.50, depending on the course and the day of the week.

"What I'm proposing is that they become recreational spaces where a variety of recreational activities can take place," Keesmaat told *The Canadian Press* on Wednesday. "One of the challenges with golf courses is that they're only open six months of the year, so the other six months of the year that land sits unused and it could be used year-round."

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Applebaum feels that instead of scrapping the golf features from the properties altogether, mixed-use facilities could be added to the courses to make the most of the spaces.

"I think mixed use, in particular non-obtrusive uses like cross-country skiing, recreational ice patches for pleasure skating and hockey, is a brilliant idea," said Applebaum, who pointed out that St. Andrews in Scotland, the oldest course in the world, is open to the public on Sundays as a park. "There's probably a half-dozen golf courses that do that today and do it really well."

A report to Toronto city council in January found that the five city-managed golf courses typically bring in \$4.5 million to \$5 million per year — not enough to recoup the costs of running them. It also found that the number of rounds played at those courses decreased by about 15 per cent between 2007 and 2016, from 187,000 to 157,965.

Toronto's 2018-2026 capital plan has identified \$9.7 million in improvements needed for all five municipal golf courses.

Golf Canada defended the three courses targeted for closure, saying that in 2016 they had just

over 92,000 rounds played. The organization predicted that this year the number will be over 100,000 rounds because of the sport's growth and better weather.

Toronto city council commissioned a review on all five of its public courses on Jan. 31, with special requests made to look at equity and affordability of access, demographics of participation, winter access and use, as well as the courses' ecological impact.

The cities of Vancouver and Thunder Bay, Ont., are also reviewing the use of their public golf courses.

"There's really nothing new in taking a look at the golf courses," said incumbent Mayor John Tory, who leads in the polls and appears poised for victory on Oct. 22. "I take note of the fact that golf courses can be and are a contributor to our ravine strategy and to our tree canopy strategy, so I hope that when (Keesmaat) said that we would turn those into the highest and best use she didn't mean condo towers."

Keesmaat, who was Toronto's chief city planner from 2012-17, says she will not change the zoning bylaws for the three golf courses. She also thinks the issue doesn't need further review and instead wants to move to public consultation for what the communities surrounding the courses want instead of golf.

"The land use is recreational, I'm proposing that we change it from being golf courses to being more broader in terms of the public activities that take place there," said Keesmaat. "We can put other kinds of amenities in place like bike trails and other things."

"It also costs a lot to maintain golf courses, it's quite tough on the environment. We can have a more forward-looking plan that opens up these spaces."

Canada has 2,298 golf courses — both public and private — and is second in the world behind the United States (15,014). Ontario is home to 35 per cent of Canada's golf courses.

Keesmaat claims that golf's participation numbers are on the decline in Toronto and across North America, an assertion that Applebaum disputes.

"All the trends that are happening in golf are quite positive right now," said Applebaum. "There's actual growth in rounds in the past 18 months almost globally but particularly in Canada and the U.S."

"We're having a resurgence of the sport, fuelled by iconic Canadians Brooke Henderson and Adam Hadwin, who are the best in the world at what they do."

Golf Canada estimates that 5.7 million Canadians play golf at least once per year, with 84 per cent of those playing on public courses. About 60 million rounds of golf were played in Canada in 2017, a 1.6 per cent increase over the past three years.

A 2014 economic impact study commissioned by the National Allied Golf Associations — of which Golf Canada is a partner — found that the sport generated \$14.3 billion of Canada's gross domestic product, up from \$12.2 billion in 2008.