

When is it worth spending \$1.9 million to upgrade a money-losing course?

Answer: When it's in the richest part of Montgomery County.

At least that's the position of the Montgomery County Revenue Authority as reflected in the Capital Improvements Program that went before the County Council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development (PHED) Committee Thursday.

The MCRA plan would spend about \$10 million on golf course projects over the next six years, including \$1.9 million for Poolesville Golf Course to add a new food and beverage area to the golf shop building, demolish an old unused clubhouse, replace the irrigation system and build a new parking lot.

Now, \$1.9 million is roughly what it would cost to build a new irrigation system and clubhouse for Sligo Creek Golf Course AND replace the bunkers and make some other fixes. The \$1.9 million also is more than the Revenue Authority plans to spend on capital improvements for \$1.3 million it plans to spend at the profitable Northwest Golf Course or the \$1.4 million it plans to spend at the equally profitable Needwood Golf Course.

A few other comparisons between Poolesville and Sligo Creek. Poolesville, an 18-hole course, has roughly 30,000 rounds a rough to 25,000 rounds for Sligo, a nine-hole course. Poolesville is in far western Montgomery County. Sligo is the only county course inside the Beltway. Both courses struggle to break even and lose money would you apply the Revenue Authority's excessive management fee for central operations.

(As you know, the council-appointed Sligo Creek Golf task force was tasked to come up with a way to continue Sligo operations without subsidy, and recommended one of two options, either pursuing a private operator, or having the county continue to operate the course by cost-cutting measures, private fund-raising measures and recapturing revenues from the lease of the course parking lot to Holy Cross Hospital. The Council has yet to reach a decision.)

But at Thursday's PHED committee meeting, Council Member Marc Elrich effectively exposed the double standard used by the Revenue Authority when it comes to Poolesville versus Sligo. He asked Revenue Authority director Keith Miller if each of the courses targeted for capital improvements would be able to cover the cost of those improvements. Miller dodged the question and said they were trying to maintain the system as a whole. Elrich asked the question a different way, and Miller responded that the improvements were not "revenue enhancements" but were "basic infrastructure" necessary to maintain the system. Specifically, at Poolesville he said the old clubhouse is unsafe and that the irrigation system has to be replaced to maintain the course. Finally, when Elrich pressed Miller again, noting the difference between the argument now and what was said "about another course," Miller responded that Poolesville was the only county course in the western part of the county. (I guess Falls Road does not count as "west.")

I don't blame Miller. He works for a board and four out of the five members of that board are from Potomac or North Potomac. If most of the members were from Silver Spring we might have had a Poolesville Golf Course task force working last year. Nor do we want to hurt the Poolesville course or deprive the residents of western Montgomery County of a public option for golf. But the points Miller made were the same ones made by the Sligo Creek Golf Course Association, that there are sufficient revenues in the system as a whole to support a county-wide system of golf courses, including one below the Beltway.

Woody Brosnan

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