Long Range Master Plan Study

Submitted:

October 11, 2011

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This Master Plan Study explores potential long-range improvements intended to assist the Club in positioning itself within the Minnesota golf market in order to maximize its potential for financial success. This study is not intended as a comprehensive “feasibility study” or business plan but rather as a master plan study which provides a detailed review of the golf course conditions along with recommendations and cost estimates for long-range improvements and some general observations regarding the regional golf market.

This study was conducted by assessing the existing golf course and by interviewing various members of the Bemidji Town & Country Club staff including Head Golf Professional Rick Grann, Golf Course Superintendent Tom Johanns and various members of the Golf Course Board and Master Plan Committee. The study was conducted under the supervision of Kevin Norby, Owner and President of Herfort Norby Golf Course Architects and was conducted in conjunction with an in-depth operational assessment and market analysis by Golf Convergence.

Bemidji Town & Country Club was founded in approximately 1918. It is not clear who the architect was but this time period would coincide with the development of other Minnesota courses by golf architects Seth Raynor (Midland Hills, 1919 & Somerset Country Club, 1919), Donald Ross (Woodhill Country Club, 1917 and The Minikahda Club, 1916 remodel), Willie Park, Jr., (Minneapolis Golf Club, 1916) and Thomas Bendelow (Lafeyette Club, 1915). It would be interesting and potentially valuable for the Club to explore the history of the course to determine who the original architect was. A good starting place would be to research the names found in the attached Appendix A which summarizes the history of the golf course as recalled by Ms. Eleanor Bowser Pfau. The Club may also wish to publish a request for information in the local newspaper.

The Club is owned by stockholders and is currently operated as a public daily-fee facility. Much of the course’s revenue comes from the sale of season passes purchased by residents of the surrounding area with the remaining approximately 35% of its revenue being generated from green fees and cart rentals by area residents, tourists or vacationers traveling from surrounding communities.

The course has a spacious routing with good sightlines and nice elevation changes. Putting surfaces are generally good with thirteen (13) of the existing greens being original “push-up” native soil greens and five (5) of the greens being having been rebuilt over the years as modern sand-based greens.
TARGET MARKET

In order to define a long-term vision for the golf course and determine which improvements are most necessary, it is important to first define and understand the niche which the golf course occupies, or should occupy, in the market.

Bemidji Town & Country would be best defined as a public daily-fee golf course. In rural communities such as Bemidji, these courses often times rely heavily on the sale of season passes or “memberships” for revenue. Unfortunately, this frequently results in the perception by the general public that the course is available exclusively for members and thereby alienates an important customer base. In addition, although the early season sale of season passes can be a comforting source of revenue for the course, they can often result in severely discounted green fees and revenue short-falls if not priced properly. Many golf management companies have eliminated season passes all together or have relied on a combination of season passes and punch cards – for instance 10, 20 and 30 rounds. Depending on the customer base and the average number of rounds which “members” play, it is generally advised that the season pass rate be equal to the price of approximately 35 to 40 rounds. Therefore, the season pass may be the logical option for the patron who plays in excess of 40 rounds annually. For others, a punch card is often the better choice. This approach is often preferred because it eliminates the severe discounting associated with “memberships” and yet still provides a variety of affordable options for most golfers.

Rural daily-fee courses such as Bemidji Town & Country can also look to increase their revenue by establishing a more aggressive marketing program to attract destination golfers from outside the community. With relatively few competing 18-hole facilities in the area, even a moderate investment to improve playing conditions and to restore the golf course’s unique character should assist in re-establishing Bemidji Town & Country Club as a popular golf destination. Please refer to the market analysis and operational review prepared by Golf Convergence.

DEMAND & COMPETITION

There are currently eight golf courses located within 35 miles of Bemidji Town & Country Club. These include nine-hole courses at Maple Ridge in Bemidji (6 miles), Sand Trap Golf Course in Cass Lake (17 miles) and Twin Pines Golf Course in Bagley (28 miles) as well as 18-hole courses at Greenwood Golf Course in Bemidji (11 miles), Castle Highlands in Bemidji (12 miles), Black Duck Golf Course in Black Duck (21 miles), Longbow Golf Course in Walker (31 miles) and Wedgewood Golf Course in Walker (32 miles).
Generally one refers to classic golf as those course built during the 1920s in what is recognized by many as the “golden age of golf architecture”. Courses constructed during this time were constructed using horses and carts as opposed to bulldozers and mechanized earth working equipment. These courses typically had domed and elevated greens, distinct mounding, undulating fairways and small flat-sand bunkers with grass faces.

Although it is unclear who the original architect was for BTCC, the course has many of the characteristic features of a “classic” golf course. Of particular note are remnants of the original green-side bunkers on holes No. 4, 7 and 12.

It is our recommendation that BTCC conduct a “sympathetic restoration” of the golf course to restore and enhance some of the historic character of the golf course while at the same time adjusting the playability of the golf course to match the skill of the modern golfer. By conducting a sympathetic restoration of the golf course it is our belief that we can establish BTCC as a highly regarded golf destination with an experience, in Minnesota, found only at private country clubs. In addition, we feel that by making these improvements, we will be able to reduce the amount of time and money spent on bunker washouts, drainage problems and turf repair and instead direct the staff’s attention to regular ongoing maintenance and course conditioning.
Based on golf courses of similar market and similar operational quality, staffing, economic environment and financial resources, the letter grade from the review process is B- to B.

**Course Conditioning**

Maintenance and other factors can affect the golfer’s perception of the course and their ability to play the course. In looking at course conditioning we attempt to assess whether maintenance or other factors might reasonably meet the golfer’s expectations of acceptable playing conditions including turf quality, bunker sand consistency, drainage and course aesthetics. The letter grade from our review process for course conditioning is B/B+.

**Course Routing & Design**

In looking at course routing and design, we attempt to assess the design of the greens, walkability, pace of play, placement of hazards, the visual quality of the golf course and the relationship of the practice facilities and parking areas to the clubhouse. The letter grade from our review process for routing and design is B-/B.

**Course Safety**

Changes in golf equipment technology have significantly impacted the way golfers play the game from that of only a decade ago. In particular, golfers are now hitting the ball further and, consequently, hitting the ball further off-line. In assessing course safety, we attempt to determine whether conditions exist which put the golfer or the public at risk or whether conditions exist which may expose the owner to an unacceptable level of liability. The letter grade from our review process for Safety is B/B+.

**Course Playability**

Assessing playability involves looking at whether the course is designed in such a way as to offer a fair and enjoyable golf experience for the average golfer while at the same time offering the challenge and strategic qualities that the above average player enjoys. We look at the impact of trees, the placement of hazards, course length, the placement of tees, the slope of the greens, shot value and tactical diversity. The letter grade from our review process for playability is C/C+. 
The existing trees at BTCC consist generally of spruce, pine, red oak and bur oak. Unfortunately, the health of many of the red oak appear to be declining due to drought or to possibly oak wilt disease. In addition, many of the spruce are reaching the end of their life cycle and are declining due in part to common diseases such as Cytospora Canker and Rhizosphaera Needle Cast. Spruce trees are generally a poor choice for golf courses as they have very shallow root systems which makes them difficult to grow grass under. Also, when poorly located near tees and greens or fairways, they restrict sunlight and steal moisture from turf grasses. Shade on greens and tees weakens the turf and increases disease pressure, winter damage and overall maintenance costs. Selectively removing these trees would not only improve overall course conditioning by making additional water and sunlight available for turfgrass but would also provide for a more enjoyable experience for golfers. In our opinion, it is generally preferable to define the strategy and visual quality of the fairways with sand bunkers instead of rows of trees.

Our recommendation would be implement a tree removal and replacement program whereby short-lived, diseased or structurally compromised trees would be selectively removed to improve safety, reduce maintenance, improve playability and allow for the establishment of more-desirable, longer-lived trees.
SAND BUNKERS

Sand bunkers are one of the most important elements on a golf course. As a flanking bunker, they can visually and strategically frame a green or fairway. As a target or cross-bunker, they can act as an aiming point to aid in alignment. And behind a green and near water or out-of-bounds, they can act as a savior bunker to protect the golfer from being unfairly penalized.

Bunkers are often times one of the highest maintenance issues on a golf course. Over the years, the bunkers at BTCC have been edged so that the bunkers are excessively large and the capes or edges now have nearly vertical faces on which it is difficult to maintain sand. As the faces get edged and the native soils erode into the bunker, the sand becomes contaminated so that it no longer drains properly. In addition, because of the effect which technology has had on golf equipment, many of the bunkers at BTCC are no longer in play for the more accomplished golfer and are now poorly positioned so as to un-necessarily penalize the average golfer.

It is our recommendation that a “sympathetic restoration” of the bunkers be undertaken to 1.) reduce regular maintenance and repair, 2.) provide visual framing and interest, 3.) emphasize the historic character of the golf course and 4.) define the holes strategically. As indicated on the master plan, some bunkers will be removed or relocated, some reconstructed and some new bunkers will be added. By redesigning and reconstructing the existing bunkers and selectively adding new bunkers, it is our belief that BTCC can provide a more enjoyable golfing experience for golfers of all ages and abilities while, at the same time, minimizing the time and expense of repairing unexpected washouts and repairs.
The existing irrigation system at BTCC was installed in 1985 and consists of a series of pipes, control satellites, sprinkler heads and a pumping system that delivers water to the golf course from a pond located on the left side of hole No. 18. In 2005 it was determined that the well casing had collapsed. As a result, a new independent irrigation pump station and wet well were installed and the existing well was converted to a low-pressure system intended to supply water to the irrigation pond. The new pump system, installed in 2007, consists of two 60-horse power vertical turbines with a 25 horse pressure maintenance booster pump capable of pumping up to 1,200 gallons per minute. The existing irrigation pond is somewhat undersized to meet the demands of the irrigation system during prolonged dry periods. Ideally the pond would be enlarged with excess soil from the pond excavation being used to regrade and raise the fairway on No. 18. Raising the fairway would improve drainage and minimize turf loss from winter desiccation and summer heat stress. Prior to excavating the pond, soil borings should be taken and care should be taken to insure that excavation of the pond does not break through to the water table.

The existing piping system consists of PVC pipe with ductile iron fittings and, although the system is nearly 30 year old, the number of irrigation leaks and breaks are relatively minimal. This is probably due to the well-drained granular soils. The typical life expectancy of PVC irrigation pipe is approximately 25 years.

The control system was updated in 2004 to a new Toro Osmac computerized central control and now has the ability to more efficiently monitor and manage the use of water.

Long-range future improvements to the irrigation system should include enlarging the existing irrigation pond to provide additional storage capacity as well as the replacement of the entire irrigation system including piping, valves, irrigation heads and satellite or decoder control. A new irrigation system can provide improved coverage and control so that water can be placed exactly where it is required. It is estimated that a new double-row system will cost between $600,000 and $1,100,000 depending on soil conditions, head spacing, the total number of heads and the control system.
Currently, BTCC has nineteen sand-based putting greens that were originally grassed with Creeping Bentgrass. The practice green, as well as greens on holes No. 8, 9, 10, 14 and 17 were reconstructed in 1991 as modern USGA sand-based greens. In general, the greens are adequately sized and have a sufficient number of pin positions. The greens on hole No. 1 and 18 were expanded to increase the size and add pin positions. Holes No. 6 and 13 have severely sloping greens that, with today’s lower cutting heights, have limited pin positions and are difficult to maintain. Aside from removal of trees to improve turf quality and fixing a few relatively minor issues with the greens, we would not see reconstruction of the putting surfaces as one of the critical high-priority issues at this time. Long-term improvements may include the reconstruction of greens on holes No. 6, 11, 13 and 15 to improve playability with the eventual reconstruction of the remaining greens on holes 1-5, 7, 12, 16 and 18 to modern sand-based USGA specifications.
FAIRWAYS & ROUGHS

Like many older golf courses in Minnesota and throughout the Midwest, the existing fairways, tees and roughs at BTCC are comprised of a blend of annual bluegrass (Poa annua), creeping bentgrass (Agrostis palustris) and Kentucky bluegrass (Poa pratensis). Annual bluegrass, is essentially a weed which very aggressively establishes itself at the lower cutting heights found on golf courses. It particularly favors wet soils and areas which are over-watered such as the fairways and approaches on holes No. 14 through 18 at BTCC. Unfortunately, annual bluegrass is not shade tolerant, heat tolerant or completely winter hardy.

The preferred grass for fairways and tees at BTCC would be Kentucky Bluegrass. As an alternate, to provide a more up-scale playing surface, fairways could be grassed with Creeping Bentgrass. Bentgrass can be maintained with lower fertilizer levels but requires increased chemical and fungicide treatments to protect against disease such as snow mold. Our recommendation would be to re-grass the fairways to reduce turf loss and to improve playing conditions. This can be done gradually on a hole-by-hole basis as part of smaller projects or completed as a more comprehensive re-grassing project. Care must be taken to select varieties which are hardy and disease resistant and yet will match the existing turf. Many of the newer low-growing/elite bluegrass varieties are very dark green in color and may not be a good match for the existing grasses.
Teeing Grounds

The tees at BTCC are generally of sufficient size given the current level of play. However, many of the tees are uneven and heavily shaded by trees so, on some holes, a portion of the teeing area is not usable. In addition, many holes have large gaps between the tees or are poorly positioned so that holes play disproportionately more difficult from the red or gold tees.

Our recommendation is to construct a number of new tees intended to increase the overall square footage of teeing area and to make the course more enjoyable for a wider range of golfers. This would occur primarily by constructing new forward tees on holes No. 1, 2, 5, 7, 10, 12 and new gold tees on holes No. 4, 6, 8, 9, 13, 15 and 17. On holes No. 6, 11 and 18, tees would be adjusted to improve alignment and to reduce the visual impact of the cart paths. New back tees could also be constructed for additional length on holes No. 2, 5, 9, 11, 13 and 18.

In addition, we would recommend revising the color system from red, gold, white and blue to something that would require visitors to select the proper tee based on score card yardage rather than color alone.
Cart paths at BTCC generally run from green to tee and are constructed of gravel or asphalt with a granular base. Many of the cart paths are in poor condition due to damage from tree roots. Near tees and at corners, cart paths are too narrow and have resulted in dead turf and eroded edges. In addition, some cart paths should be realigned to minimize the visual impact of the paths from the tee.

Because of the rolling topography and the generally spacious nature of the golf course, it is not necessary to install continuous cart paths. Instead, we would recommend extending cart paths from greens to fairways and selectively through lower poorly-drained areas in an effort to minimize soil compaction and damage to the turf.
The clubhouse at BTCC seems, in general, adequately sized given current levels of play. The clubhouse is somewhat dated but has been nicely maintained for the age of the structure. The deck and restaurant area have good views of the golf course and appears to have sufficient space to accommodate a full shotgun-start golf outing. Although it would be desirable to accommodate a larger number of people, investing significant capital in the clubhouse would not be advised at this time with the level of improvements required on the golf course.

The clubhouse’s location provides for good access to the practice facilities but do not offer good views from the pro-shop to the starting or finishing holes. In addition, it is not immediately obvious how to find the pro-shop and is even more confusing after one enters the clubhouse. At some point, we would recommend a modest remodeling to improve sightlines and to make the pro-shop more accessible.

A typical maintenance facility for an 18-hole golf course would generally include approximately 1,500 to 2,000 square feet of office and heated shop space as well as 4,000 to 5,000 square feet of equipment and cold storage space, a chemical storage facility and exterior storage bins for topdressing mix and bunker sand. The existing maintenance facilities appear to be insufficient to accommodate golf course maintenance operations and equipment storage. Long-range improvements should include the addition of material storage bins, equipment wash pads and chemical storage facilities.
The driving range at BTCC is somewhat conveniently located near the clubhouse and starting tee area. The length and width are generally adequate but the teeing area is too small to handle large events or a significant increase in daily use. A larger tee and a new concrete tee line with mats would provide for improved turf quality and reduced pressure during outings or tournaments and while turf is dormant in the spring. Improved irrigation coverage and control would provide for better turf recovery and would aid in reducing the cost of lost balls and labor required to retrieve errant balls hit towards the surrounding wooded areas. Contour mowing a fairway outline and target greens would create the sense of hitting towards green complexes.

The practice green seems adequately sized but struggles agronomically due to root encroachment and shade from large spruce trees on the south and east side of the green. We would recommend selectively removing trees to improve the overall health and quality of the putting surface and to reduce turf loss due to winter damage.

The Club may wish to consider constructing a new short-game practice facility or a 3-hole to 9-hole short course geared towards getting youth involved in the game of golf. The course could be located on the vacant land west of the driving range and could be a potential source of revenue through the sale of practice facility season passes and short-course green fees.
ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

There are a number of improvements that would improve the sustainability of the golf course operation at BTCC. One of the most noticeable and most beneficial conservation opportunities would come from the installation of a more efficient irrigation system which would allow the flexibility and control to place irrigation water where it is specifically required. New irrigation heads have more uniform coverage and precipitation rates.

In addition, the master plan identifies a number of areas where turf grass could be converted to low maintenance or native areas including the area to the right of No. 7 tee and the areas near Hole 10 tee and left of Hole 1 green. Turfgrass conversion areas would utilize shorter native and non-native grasses such as fescue, Prairie Dropseed and Side Oats Grama Grass. The conversion of these native and low-maintenance areas will reduce chemical and fertilizer inputs, conserve water, reduce regular mowing and provide additional habitat for birds, rodents and insects.

Additional measures to improve environmental sustainability include the installation of an irrigation weather station to monitor and reduce water consumption, the installation of bird houses and bat houses, the supplemental use of skylights and/or solar panels for the maintenance and clubhouse facilities and the use of porous paving materials at the clubhouse area. Audubon International provides information and certification of golf courses seeking to improve environmental stewardship. Visit their website at www.auduboninternational.org.
For purpose of prioritizing future projects, we have categorized improvements into critical, competitive and comprehensive. Those items listed as critical are, in our opinion, those improvements which are in greatest need of being addressed and would play the most significant role in reducing or stabilizing repairs and maintenance and in increasing revenue through increased daily fee rounds.

**Critical**

1. Selectively remove trees on holes No. 1, 2, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16 & 17 to reduce damage to cart paths.
2. Selectively remove trees on holes No. 1, 3, 6, 8, 16 and 17 to reduce shade and improve turf quality on tees, greens and fairways.
3. Selectively remove trees in rough to improve sightlines to landing areas, reduce drought stress on turf and improve overall quality of turf in rough and fairways.
4. Complete a comprehensive bunker renovation to improve playability and maintenance and to restore classic character.
5. Install a new irrigation system.

**Competitive**

1. Enlarge pond on No. 18 to improve irrigation capacity and improve fairway drainage.
2. Reconstruct and realign tees on hole No. 18 improve sightline to landing area.
3. Construct new forward tees on holes No. 2, 5-7, 10-13 and 18 to improve playability and increase teeing area.
4. Construct new gold tees on holes No. 4-6, 8-9, 12-13, 15 and 17 for improved playability and increased teeing area.
5. Reconstruct green on No. 6, 11, 13 and 15 to improve playability.
6. Reconstruct greens on No. 1-5, 7, 12, 16 and 18 to modern sand-based USGA specifications
7. Install fairway drainage on holes No. 4 and 6 to reduce turf loss.
8. Re-grass fairways to provide consistent playing surface and reduced turf loss.
9. Construct a new short-game practice facility on land west of the driving range.
10. Complete minor renovation of clubhouse to provide a more accessible pro-shop, improve exterior façade and updated front entry landscaping.
PHASING & DISRUPTION TO PLAY

Generally, when completing a golf course renovation project, we try to minimize disruption to play. However, when the project is extensive enough, it is often necessary and beneficial to close all or part of the golf course to allow the contractor to quickly and efficiently complete the work and to then open with a new and dramatic look. At Bemidji Town & Country Club, the improvements which are most critical, such as the removal of trees, installation of an irrigation system and bunker reconstruction are not particularly disruptive provided that a qualified golf course contractor who understands golf course construction and sequencing is utilized.

In addition, it is important to note that there are opportunities for the Club to minimize the project costs by utilizing the maintenance staff to assist the contractor during construction. Typically, this includes removal and reinstallation of irrigation components, installation and maintenance of erosion control, removal and installation of sod or bunker sand and grow-in and maturation of the completed golf holes.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

We would offer the following additional recommendations:

1. Promote family golf and a junior golf program by installing junior tees and revising scorecards.
2. Replace deteriorated timber edging at cart paths with asphalt or concrete edging or curbing to reduce visual clutter and damage to turf.
3. The course should immediately consider the installation of larger more prominent signage for the golf course on Highway 2 and Highway 71.
4. The course should implement a capital improvement fund to be funded by voluntary contributions, fund raising campaigns and mandatory contributions for season pass holders.
5. To expand green fee revenue, the Club should consider expanding its efforts to market the golf course to surrounding communities such as Park Rapids, Walker, Grand Forks and the Twin Cities.
6. The Club should continue to develop an email data base capable of tracking customer names, emails and address information. This can be useful in tracking total rounds and in notifying patrons of Play-&-Stay packages and weekly tee time specials via email. Each customer at Bemidji Town & Country Club should be in the database.
7. Research the history of the golf course in an attempt to identify the name of the original golf architect. This information could prove valuable in marketing the golf course establishing the golf course as one of the premier facilities in the state of Minnesota.
Based on our observations and review of the golf course, the primary issue facing Bemidji Town & Country Club is the impact that trees are having on playability, turf quality and cart paths. In addition, it is our opinion that an opportunity exists to increase revenues from season pass holders and daily-fee patrons by conducting a sympathetic restoration of the golf to capitalize on the historic character of the golf course and thereby differentiate BTCC from other courses in the region and the state of Minnesota.

The key components of this renovation would include 1.) tree removal and replacement to improve turf quality and playability, 2.) a comprehensive bunker renovation to improve the visual character and playability of the golf course, 3.) the installation of a new irrigation system to improve turf quality and playing conditions and 4.) the construction of new tees to make the course more playable and more enjoyable for a wider range of golfer abilities.

Even a moderate investment directed at improving course conditioning should assist in providing increased value as compared to other areas courses. In addition, the course should benefit from having the ability to attract an increased number of corporate outings, tournaments and fundraising events. These issues, combined with changes to the membership structure and improvements in marketing should establish Bemidji Town & Country Club as one of the premier golf facilities in northern Minnesota and should set the course for improved financial stability.

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