

October 7, 2011

To: Josh Durand, Parks and Recreation Department

From: David Wigglesworth, Community Advisory Group

Re: Perspective & Recommendations on Disc Golf course at Westchester Lagoon (Chester Creek)

Per your request, I am providing you with my perspective and recommendations concerning the disc golf course at Westchester Lagoon (Chester Creek). The basis for my comments sometimes includes quotes from other people who have provided written public comments. I don't identify the name of the person making the comment, but I do quote them verbatim. I refer to these comments as "Comment A, B, etc." in the text. The Park's Department has the public record if someone is interested in knowing who made specific comments. Thank you for your efforts to address issues raised about this course.

## Discussion

I spent considerable time over the past several months gathering objective information about the disc golf course at Westchester Lagoon. I walked the course itself at various times during any given week. I observed how the course is used - noting its condition and layout and assessing the interaction between disc golfers and other users of the trail system. I also carefully reviewed the public comment you provided to me regarding this course.

My review of the public comment and my own observations underscore several concerns with respect to the Chester Creek course, as well as, overall support for the existence of disc golf courses in Anchorage parks. The following questions/concerns raised or implied through the public comments regarding the Chester Creek course helped me develop the recommendations presented at the end of this document.

- **Question:** Does the Chester Creek course layout prevent or foster conflicts between golfers and other park and trail users.

**My Response:** **The course layout**, despite recent modifications, **fosters conflicts** between golfers and other user groups. Comments received reinforce this point, for example:

Comment A: Disc golf should be allowed in parks "where golfers could complete the course without crossing roadways or bike paths".

Comment B: "The course is superimposed on four important trails: Chester Creek trail, which is a critical link to the Coastal trail; the trail along Minnesota heading up to West High; the new trail along Spenard; and the link along L Street between Chester Creek and downtown. Additionally, the area includes three tunnel bottlenecks and many blind curves. It's heavily used by bikers, runners, and walkers, including commuters, students, dogs, babies in strollers or trailers, and little kids on small bikes. Does it make sense, then, to add large groups of people sauntering shoulder to shoulder, often stretching across the entire width of the trail? Now let's point out that many of them are openly drinking alcohol-- even carrying cases of beer along with their

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All of this happened a little below the radar of city officials in an area of parkland that was pretty much a permanent homeless type camping area. The park was under utilized as a recreation area. The homeless folks moved out when the disc golfers moved in.

That stretch of trail has become much busier over time and is becoming unsafe during periods of overuse because of bad lines of sight approaching the two tunnels which are somewhat narrow as well.

Contributing to the overuse complications is the increase in popularity of disc golf, especially among adolescent males. On most pleasant summer evenings several hundred adolescents can be on the disc golf course and the connecting trail system degrading the experience of the other trail users. Portions of the disc golf course directly conflict with sections of the Chester Creek trail system posing unacceptable levels of risk for other trail users.

The over use in this section of the trail/park requires some management action. It makes the most sense to manage the disc golf component. While disc golf remains an overall positive activity and a benefit to the community as a whole, steps can be taken to reduce overuse in particular locations such as at the Westchester Disc Golf Course.

For example the targets can be moved out of the present location in springtime and returned in the fall making Westchester more of a winter only course. Overall trail usage is much less in winter and number of rounds played is likely to decrease as well.

This may become the model for dealing with overuse of disc golf within the city parks. Baskets can be shifted to new locations to manage the number of rounds per day. The entire course can be moved,(all nine targets) or the targets can be relocated in groups of twos or threes to locations that may be too small for a full sized course. The best situation is a disc golf facility of some type within walking distance for every 15 year old in Anchorage

The following are city parks that are big enough to accommodate a full sized course:

Russian Jack Springs Park- room for 9 south of DeBarr Rd. and 18 north of DeBarr Rd.

Centennial Park- room for 9 or 18

Lions Park in Mountain View- room for 9 or 18

Oceanview Park-9

Muldoon Parkstrip-9

Kinkaid Park- 100 holes easy

Beach Lake -18

bag of discs. This does not make for a safe or pleasant experience for other trail users”.

Comment C: “When the frisbee golf course first went in at Westchester Lagoon, we thought it looked fun and hoped our son would be interested once he hit his teens. Within a couple of years, we'd noted that most of the players seemed to have an open beer and the distinctive scent of marijuana filled the air and we began to hope our son would steer clear of the game. Occasionally, we'd have trouble with players obstructing the bike path. But this year, it's become ridiculous. Virtually every bike ride through the area involves weaving through large crowds of players who often make little effort to share the trail, walking in packs, obstructing the tunnels, making rude drunken comments about us, etc”

- **Question:** What is the impact of the course on vehicle traffic on Minnesota Road, Spenard Road and 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue?

**My Response:** The course continues to result in potential public safety concerns for golfers, trail users and vehicle drivers. This point is underscored by the following comments and my own observations:

Comment A: “...if you sit on 19th Avenue and watch people drive to the upgrade park entrance, they are literally chugging beers and smoking joints as they drive in. It is actually kind of dangerous on that road sometimes.

Comment B: “Golfers are still crossing Minnesota Rd”

My observations:

- Vehicles backing up the wrong way on Spenard Rd to park in the 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue lot.
  - Golfers still crossing Minnesota even after course layout change.
  - Discs are thrown across Minnesota Road (endangering drivers), between (I believe) holes three on the S. side of Minnesota and hole four on the N. side of Minnesota.
- **Question:** Does the Disc Golf Association have the capacity to steward this course?
- My Response:** The current President of the Association has been very proactive in trying to address concerns at the subject course. Despite these efforts, **my conclusion is that the Association does not have the capacity to address the concerns identified.** The group does not have unrestricted funds to allocate to this course and as expressed by the President many users of the Chester Creek course are not members of the Association so the group cannot reach these users in a formal manner. The President recently asked APD for more police presence in the area-citing illegal drug use and drinking. The President himself expressed in a letter to APD that a group of course users made “threats against my [his] health, property and safety.”
- **Question:** What is the capacity of APD to address public safety concerns, drugs and alcohol used by golfers (and others)?

**My Response:** APD appears to have stepped up its patrol of this area – with beneficial results. However, I question if such coverage can be sustained given other APD priorities. Moreover,

**police presence does not address the root cause of problems at this course** – which I believe has more to do with its location and layout.

- **Question:** What is the impact of the course on other park and trail user experiences?

**My Response:** Many comments underscore the value of the course in getting more people using the park. At the same time several comments indicate that initial excitement over the course declined significantly as the unintended consequences of the course revealed themselves – public safety concerns, drugs, drinking, litter, property and habitat losses, increased trail traffic in an already congested area.

- **Question:** What is the impact of the course on riparian habitat, park property and other infrastructure?

**My Response:** The course has negatively impacted wetland habitat, injured and killed trees, resulted in property impacts to newly restored areas (e.g. lands around new parking area), increased litter and overall maintenance requirements for the area.

- **Question:** Has the presence of the course impacted public safety?

**My Response:** Based on comments reviewed and my own observations and experiences the answer to this question is a resounding - Yes.

- **Question:** Does the course enhance or detract from overall enjoyment of the area?

**My Response:** I believe that disc golf should be allowed in Municipal parks, though the course at Chester Creek detracts from the experience of many other park/trail users. It is a legitimate use and many people- young and old – enjoy the game. There are a significant number of people who enjoy disc golf in our community so demand for sustaining courses is certainly justified. The questions left unanswered for me and apparently also for the people providing comments on this issue are:

Where are the appropriate locations for disc golf courses in Municipal parks?

What conditions, restrictions and/or parameters should be applied to these courses and required of the people that use them?

## **Recommendations**

**Recommendation #1:** Disc golf is a legitimate use of Municipal parkland, but not all parkland and under defined conditions that still need to be determined by the Municipal Parks Department in consultation with all users of public parklands. In my opinion, the parklands that contain the Chester Creek disc golf course are being inappropriately managed (by default) for a single-use purpose, while the historical use for this area is multiple-use: running, biking, nature viewing, walking, and skiing. The new signs at the perimeter of the Chester Creek course stating “disc golf zone” underscore this point. Additional courses should not be installed piecemeal. **I recommend development of an overall disc golf plan that is vetted with the broader park user community.**

**Recommendation # 2:** I believe the Chester Creek course is inappropriate for this area based on analysis of the comments provided to me by the Parks Department and my understanding of the situation at the Chester Creek course. **My recommendation is for the Parks Department to permanently remove the Chester Creek course this fall and next spring work with park users and other groups to restore the area to its pre-course condition or better.** This would likely involve planting trees and caring for damaged trees, restoring wetland areas, removing poorly designed and installed course “improvements”, to name a few needs for the area.

Rationale: Disc golf courses should be located in areas where golfers can complete the course without holes in conflict with a trail, roadway and other park uses and in an area that eliminates or minimizes requirements for golfers to cross roads or bike trails. Despite past efforts to realign the Chester Creek course, the course holes require discs to be thrown in very close proximity to the bike trail and in some instances directly in the trail right of way. Moreover, golfers (quite often in large groups at Chester Creek) have to use the trail to get from hole-to-hole creating conflicts with other trail users and uses. The tunnels are just too tempting for many golfers not to throw a disc through. User conflicts are inevitable at the Chester Creek course. Signs, education, policing and other administrative controls cannot overcome inherent site location and design flaws with this course.

These points coupled with the drug use, expressed public safety concerns, increased litter, lack of capacity for the well-intentioned Disc Golf Association to steward the area and increased burdens on an already understaffed Parks Department to maintain park assets in this area reinforce my recommendation to remove the course.

Finally, I cannot ignore my own personal experiences with this course in making this recommendation. Of the several negative experiences I have had with the Chester Creek disc golf course, the most serious involved going over the handle bars of my bicycle as I applied my brakes in an effort to avoid being struck in the face by a disc thrown through the bike trail tunnel/culvert at Minnesota Rd crossing. My accident, which occurred over a year ago, resulted in several abrasions on my arms and hands and an injury to two knuckles on my right hand that to this day have not fully healed. I don’t believe that bikers, walkers, runners and other trail users should have to wonder if they are going to get hit in the head with a disc. **The Chester Creek disc golf course should be removed.**

**Recommendation #3:** Along with removing the Chester Creek course, **I recommend that the Parks Department immediately work with the disc golf community and other park users to identify areas suitable for this activity and to determine the conditions under which disc golf should be allowed on Municipal parklands.** It is my hope that such actions will help prevent the issues, concerns, and problems similar to those associated with the Chester Creek course.

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