

Report from the  
**Sligo Creek Stakeholder Advisory Group**  
to the Board of Directors of the  
**Montgomery County Revenue Authority**

September 11, 2008

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## **I. Background**

The Sligo Creek Golf Course (SCGC) is situated in about the middle of Sligo Creek Park. The 65 acres of the 9-hole course constitutes about ten percent of the open space set along Sligo Creek. The park and course serve the most diverse and densely populated area of the County. The course dates back to before World War II and is the oldest public course in the County.

On October 26th, 2006, the Montgomery County Revenue Authority (MCRA) entered into a 30-year lease of the Sligo course and three other larger courses from Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC). MCRA had already operated five other public courses for some time, and this increased their golf properties to nine. In early March, the MCRA met with North Hills of Sligo Civic Association (the neighborhood closest to the course) and presented their proposed major changes to the course. As required in the 2006 lease agreement, the MCRA presented (March 17, 2007) a preliminary Master Plan to the M-NCPPC Montgomery County Planning Board, covering proposed renovations of the four newly leased courses. The plan proposed reconfiguring the Sligo Creek course and adding a large, lighted driving range and one to two miniature golf courses.

Over the next nine months, MCRA met with golfers, community leaders, and County officials to present the MCRA concept for the course and to receive reaction. On January 9, 2008, the MCRA hosted a public meeting at which the concept was aired and consultants presented their preliminary opinions on the potential impact on traffic, light pollution, and the local environment. As noted in a letter (February 4, 2008) from the MCRA Board to Michael Knapp, President of the County Council, this "meeting was attended by about 200 residents who spiritedly expressed their continued concerns and disagreement with the proposed concept."

As a consequence of the wide-spread public concerns about the plans for the Sligo course, and an unfavorable recommendation from the County Executive, MCRA withdrew its submitted Capital Improvement Plan for FY09-14 for the Sligo Creek, Northwest, and Needwood courses. Instead it requested that the project remain part of the Capital Improvement Plan with funding of up to \$100,000 for Sligo Creek planning. The MCRA also decided to "develop an advisory group representative of those affected by the potential changes."

## **II. Proceedings of the Sligo Creek Stakeholder Advisory Group**

During April 2008, Keith Miller, Executive Director of MCRA, invited selected individuals to participate as stakeholders in the advisory group. On April 22<sup>nd</sup>, the stakeholders met with Mr. Miller at the Executive Office Building to go over goals, schedule, and related matters in launching the committee. The initial group was to consist of two local residents (Heather

Phipps and Michael Welsh), one representative from the Countywide Recreation Advisory Board (Donna Bartko), one from the Silver Spring Recreation Advisory Board (Robin Bradshaw), one from the Silver Spring Citizens Advisory Board, two "Sligo Creek golfers" (Joe Liberta and Byrne Peake), one representative of *Friends of Sligo Creek* (Bruce Sidwell; alternate, Laura Mol), one from Montgomery County Public Schools, one from M-NCPPC staff (Linda Komes; alternate, Doug Redmond), and one from the First Tee of Montgomery County (Laura Sildon). Bruce Sidwell was chosen by the group to be the chair, Laura Sildon was chosen as vice-chair, and Tara Jacob of MCRA agreed to act as recording secretary. The Stakeholders agreed to meet every other Tuesday evening and accepted the MCRA charge:

*to become familiar with the current conditions at Sligo Creek Golf Course and to make recommendations to the MCRA that the Group feels will be acceptable to the community at large while making the facility environmentally and economically sustainable and a positive contribution to the golf course system.*

The next meeting was held on May 6<sup>th</sup> at the Park & Planning building at 9500 Brunnett Avenue (Parkside Headquarters). The bulk of the meeting focused on a presentation by Keith Miller on background information about MCRA and the courses it manages, the MCRA lease, information about the financial performance of Sligo and other leased courses, and the facility needs of the Sligo course. Mr. Miller emphasized the need to enhance revenue to meet long-term infrastructure goals for the course. The group also considered adding additional stakeholders from neighborhood associations that had expressed an interest in the proceedings but were not represented, plus a related question presented by Heather Phipps no longer being the sole and official representative from the North Hills of Sligo Creek Civic Association. To resolve these issues, a motion was passed (5 for; 2 opposed; 1 abstaining) making Phipps an at-large representative, and expanding the Stakeholders to include two more civic associations. The motion also removed the vacant Silver Spring Citizens Association from the group in order to make room for a possible additional civic association.

At the May 20<sup>th</sup> meeting, Adam Pagnucco joined the Stakeholders Advisory Group as a neighborhood representative (Forest Estates Community Association). Duke Beattie joined, representing the Montgomery County Public Schools. Most of the meeting was spent assembling ideas on possible improvements to the course, many of which came from those previously assembled by North Hills of Sligo Creek Civic Association.

At the June 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting, Karen Howland joined the Stakeholders as a neighborhood representative (Woodside Forest Association). Several more ideas were suggested, including some from the First Tee of Montgomery County.

The next two meetings (June 17<sup>th</sup> and July 1<sup>st</sup>) centered on consideration of a driving range for the Sligo Creek course site. The discussion covered where the driving range might go, implications for the golf course, the potential as a profit center, as well as impacts on the park and neighborhood. At the meeting on July 1st, a motion was carried (5 for; 1 opposed; 2 abstaining) to recommend to the MCRA Board that no driving range be added to the Sligo Creek course. As her term was up on the Silver Spring Recreation Advisory Board, the representative from that organization left the group; no replacement was found.

On July 15<sup>th</sup>, the meeting began with more discussion of the pros and cons of a driving range. A motion was made but defeated (3 for; 4 opposed; 2 abstaining) to recommend no changes be made to the golf course. Most of the meeting focused on reviewing the rest of the ideas for the

course. The majority of ideas were left on the list of recommendations since no member of the Stakeholders objected to them.

At the July 29<sup>th</sup> meeting, the Stakeholders discussed whether a miniature golf course should be recommended. A motion to not recommend was passed (6 for; 2 opposed). In addition, a motion to rescind the previous vote to not recommend a driving range was defeated (2 for; 6 opposed to rescinding). Carole Barth joined the group as a neighborhood representative from Northwood-Four Corners Civic Association.

On August 12<sup>th</sup>, a quorum was not achieved for the scheduled meeting and thus no official business was conducted.

The last face-to-face meeting was held on August 26<sup>th</sup>. The Stakeholders discussed and approved a proposal (6 for; 0 opposed; 2 abstaining) to recommend that MCRA strengthen the environmental planning and management of the course and promote Sligo's "green" identity (detailed in section III.C., below)

The Stakeholders also considered the possibility of a "chip and putt" fee area. The group noted that, to make room for this, the current course would likely need to be somewhat shortened and/or re-configured. It was also unclear to the group if this option would generate significant revenue over expenses.

The Stakeholders also discussed adding one or more indoor virtual golf stations to the site. Most information for the discussion had been obtained from the experience of the Paint Branch Golf Complex, where there is a single virtual station; it cost approximately \$40,000 and was purchased with grant funds. It is used primarily for training and fitting of clubs. It is not considered a "profit center." However, since at Paint Branch it competes with a 40-stall lighted driving range, and its use as a "virtual" range is not promoted, some members of the group thought it might generate revenue at Sligo in the absence of a driving range. It was also noted that a significant amount of space would need to be created to house any devices obtained. It is thought by some members that, if a grant could be found to pay for this amenity, it would be a useful addition to the Sligo course. Both the concept of "chip and putt" and "virtual golf," with notes about their limitations, were added to the list of Section IV, *Ideas Recommended for Further Consideration*, below.

The draft report to the MCRA Board was reviewed section by section and Stakeholders voted unanimously to authorize the chair to incorporate decisions and discussion of the present meeting into the first draft and to circulate the revision for final approval by e-mail.

### **III. Chief Findings of the Stakeholders Advisory Group**

#### **A. Driving Range**

Much more time and energy was spent looking at this possible recommendation than any other. Since a driving range was the idea thought to have the most potential to generate revenue, the group examined closely the financial information provided by MCRA, and the analysis done by Kennady Consulting for MCRA in January 2007. There was disagreement among the Stakeholders about how firmly to accept the projections made available. This disagreement also carried over into how best to interpret the lease language that allows MCRA to return a course

to Park and Planning if it is "adverse to the entire Golf System."

The Stakeholders recognize that several factors bring a more acute attention to changes to Sligo compared to most other MCRA courses. The course is very local in nature: users live nearby; and any changes to the course, either positive or negative, will impact local residents and users of the park much more than residents living at more distant points in the County. Further, the course site is small and there is essentially no buffer between it and adjacent houses and the park. The course has been essentially unchanged in character since the adjacent Beltway was built in the early 60s. Lastly, being so old, the trees around and throughout the course are larger than found in younger courses.

Off-setting the benefits of a driving range, many Stakeholders felt, were a range of problems. Major objections included: 1) Many current users might dislike the unavoidable shortening and re-arrangement of the course to accommodate a driving range. 2) The extension of business hours until late in the evening would bring light and noise pollution, as well as add to already very congested traffic associated with nearby Georgia Avenue and Colesville Road. 3) A driving range would degrade the local environment in a variety of ways.

The quantitative uncertainties about both the benefits and problems of a driving range helped prolong the group's discussion on this issue. Ultimately, the majority of the group seemed satisfied that there was enough qualitative information to go forward with a vote. The motion to not recommend this option was voted on two occasions a month apart. Each time that decision was strongly supported

## **B. Miniature Golf**

The group spent much less time debating this idea than the driving range. This was due to the sense that both the benefits and risks to Sligo were less than those from a driving range. Plus, since this idea was taken up after the driving range, the group benefited from the debate that had occurred about it since most of the issues were similar. The decision to not recommend a miniature golf course at Sligo was also strongly supported.

## **C. Sligo as a "Green" Course**

At the last meeting, on August 26<sup>th</sup>, the attending members unanimously approved a proposal to the MCRA Board to develop and promote Sligo as an environmentally-supportive course:

- Recognizing that the Sligo Creek Golf Course is an important part of the open space, woods, and fields of the Sligo Creek watershed, and has a tributary that flows into the creek, plus many large, mature trees;
- that the Revenue Authority management has already taken steps to reduce the use of fertilizers and other chemicals that may run into Sligo Creek, and that the Maryland-National Capitol Park and Planning Commission has invested significantly in improvements to the storm water pond and in stream restoration on the golf course; and
- that the "greening" of the Sligo golf course site can build interest and support for the course among golfers and non-golfers, young and old, and can contribute to educating the wider community about the contribution of the game to the local environment;

the Stakeholder Advisory Group recommends to the Board of Directors of the Montgomery County Revenue Authority:

1. That the Sligo Golf Course be developed and promoted as an eco-friendly course, showcasing ecologically sound practices;
2. That an environmental management plan be developed, applying both national “best practices” for older golf courses and locally developed standards from the ecology of Sligo Creek watershed;
3. That the Revenue Authority constitute an ongoing advisory group for the purpose of contributing local expertise to the environmental and outreach efforts needed to support a “green” Sligo Golf Course.

In addition, the Stakeholders’ sense was that promoting this goal for all the public courses should be undertaken by the MCRA.

#### **IV. Ideas Recommended for Further Consideration by MCRA**

Itemized below are ideas reviewed by the Stakeholders, who agreed to include all ideas to which no member objected. The group recognized that often the recommended idea was fairly obvious, or some were already being instituted by the course manager (these are marked with an asterisk\*) or, in some cases, investigation of detail was beyond the scope of the group’s work (e.g., changes to the clubhouse).

##### **A. Increase Revenue**

1. Increase fee to play (e.g., \$1-2) \*
2. Market merchandise on website
3. Offer lessons \*
4. Partner with Montgomery County Recreation Department to have classes at Sligo Creek
5. Explore special discounts or packages, e.g., annual "memberships", weekday senior rates, community golf days with lower rates for neighborhood residents, volume discounts, memberships of youth with reduced round fees, leagues, "golf by the slice", i.e., for less than 9 holes, promote non-peak hours. \*
6. Market to local businesses for group outings
7. Expand advertising: e.g., yellow pages, expanded web page, signs on Beltway and key intersections
8. Promote unique features of Sligo Creek Golf Course in advertising, e.g., oldest municipal course in Montgomery County, quick nine-holes available inside the Beltway, unique conservation-minded course
9. Renovations of clubhouse could include rental space for parties and other events, "virtual golf", snack bar with more appeal to non-golf customers (e.g., cyclists).
10. Investigate "virtual golf" products for their educational, recreational, and revenue-generating potential; bearing in mind facility issues such as fit with renovated clubhouse or other buildings, as well as the availability for funding from grants or other outside sources.
11. Poll golfers on possible tweaks to current holes to make them more attractive to children, women, and seniors

12. Investigate the potential costs and revenue as well as design issues, including changes to the present course and environmental problems, associated with adding a "chip and putt" area to the course site

## **B. Decrease Costs**

13. Decrease fairways to save on mowing, fertilizer, pesticides, and irrigation
14. Install solar/PV collectors and feed excess power back into power grid
15. Use drought-resistant turf grasses in fairways; increase plantings of hardy native drought-resistant trees and other plants
16. Adopt best-management practices to reduce pesticides, fertilizers, mowing
17. Improve water collection capacity of site and buildings to keep water on site to reduce irrigation costs (e.g., rain barrels, cisterns, retention ponds, rain gardens); replace impermeable with permeable surfaces to mitigate water runoff and keep water on site
18. As clubhouse or other buildings are renovated, use energy and water conserving technologies such as active and passive solar features, efficient heating, cooling, and lighting

## **C. Develop Positive Relationship with Broader Community**

19. Expand as possible support of First Tee of Montgomery County and local schools in their efforts to use the course for instruction \*; find office space for The First Tee and indoor room that would accommodate teaching when weather is bad
20. Add signs, photos, and other interpretive outreach explaining local human and natural history, and emphasizing protection of the local environment
21. Encourage local community groups to work on beautifying or naturalizing the grounds, e.g., putting up and maintaining birdhouses
22. Find community and business partners to help make Sligo a demonstration place for green golf course management practices, clubhouse design, etc. [c.f., Discovery Channel's new Planet Green Channel (*Washington Post* Business section, 2/25/08)]
23. Explore possibilities for holding community events on SCGC site
24. Consider redesigning space near the clubhouse/outdoor snack bar to enable 'Arts in the Park' activities, such as outdoor art or musical performances; allow cross-country skiing on site.

**This report was approved by the Sligo Creek Stakeholder Advisory Group for submission to the Montgomery County Revenue Authority at the MCRA meeting scheduled for September 23, 2008. Final approval was electronic—9 supporting, 2 opposing, and 1 abstaining—in a process agreed at the final face-to-face meeting of the Stakeholders.**

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Bruce Sidwell, Chair  
Sligo Creek Stakeholder Advisory Group