

Golf Course Driving Range Expansion

The golf course driving range extension debacle exemplifies the way our city conducts business, and why residents of this city are so frustrated with governance. As a reminder, Donovan Brothers, the new manager of the golf course, refused to sign the long term lease agreement with the city unless it included a clause allowing them to extend the driving range. This issue should never have come up since the city council directed city staff to leave the possibility of extending the driving range out of the negotiations from the very start (February 17, 2010), but nevertheless, it has become a big sticking point.

The driving range extension would be developed at the city's expense. Donovan Brothers, in the agreement presented last spring, would front the money for the work, and the city would repay them by reducing their rent until all of the outlay is repaid. This was agreed to with no business plan or model laying out projected costs or increases in revenue from the expansion. The financial risk was placed squarely on the shoulders of the residents of South Pasadena.

When the issue came up in city council, first during closed session (March 2, 2011) and later during several regular city council meetings there was a great deal of community contention. (See October 19, 2011 [Agenda Packet, item 12](#) for notes on these meetings, be sure to download this pdf since the city removes it from their web page, though you can always get a copy in City Hall.) Residents objected on environmental, financial, and general land use considerations. Needless to say, the issue has not disappeared, but continues in a way that once again can only lead us to believe that the city prefers operating behind closed doors with no responsibility to those they serve.

Why else would the Initial Study and Mitigated Negative Declaration (IS/MND) be carried out without reporting to city council. Yes, the initial contract with Rincon Consultants for this work (\$24,799) was below the \$25,000 cutoff that would have required city council approval and public discussion. Still knowing how contentious the issue is, it seems to me that before proceeding it would have been wise for city staff to have presented the contract and their plans to city council and the public. But once again, it was done behind closed doors by staff who may no longer be working at the city, and therefore blame, if there is any, for the costs and the ultimate outcome will reside elsewhere. (Unfortunately, there is a familiar ring to this story. The Fair Oaks project was started by others, mistakes made by others, while the residents and business owners of our city remain to carry the burden of poor judgment and mismanagement.)

[Item 12 in the Agenda Packet](#) for the upcoming (10/19/11) city council meeting asks city council to approve an increase of \$9,584 in the contract for the initial environmental work required for the driving range extension. This 38% increase brings the number to \$34,383 requiring the city manager to present it to city council, hence allowing the public to know what is going on. It should be noted that the increase in cost results from the need to modify the wastewater treatment for the golf course restaurant and bathrooms, seemingly unrelated to the driving range extension. However, it was this change that brought the current expenditures for the driving range extension

out into the open. This is just the beginning of a process that makes no sense whatsoever. Would you pay for city permits for a job in your home for which you have no idea of cost or benefit? Would you as a business owner start getting permits and doing environmental review for a project for which you had not done a proper business plan, setting out expected costs and revenues? Yet the city is doing just that.

My objection is simple. Before spending city funds for required environmental review, present a business plan for this endeavor. Show us it is a fiscally responsible move. Then open the issue to the community for a full and complete discussion of land use considerations. Allow the appropriate commissions, Natural Resources and Environmental Commission, and Parks and Recreation Commission, to advise the public and the city. Is a 27-yard extension of the existing driving range a better use of this one-acre piece of property, or might its preservation as usable habitat and peaceful recreational space by the public serve our residents better? After we have a detailed business plan showing that this makes financial sense, and residents of the city support the use of this land for the golf course, then and only then should the next step of environmental review be embarked upon.

To Candidates Running for City Council

During this city council campaign period, I ask each of the candidates to make clear to the public where you stand on this issue. We already know from the vote held on May 4, 2011 that Councilman Schneider does not support the expansion of the driving range, while Councilman Ten does. There is a lot of information available to the public on the driving range expansion. It is not a hypothetical. Your answer to what you would do if you were elected to city council does not require additional information; it is all out there in the public record for your review. Your answer will tell us more about what transparency means to you than just the simple statement that city government needs more of it. Should the city proceed with the environmental review of the golf course extension project without a clear cost/benefit analysis, input from commissions on environment considerations, and a public debate on land use consequences?