



## **PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT**

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### **CITY COUNCIL STAFF REPORT**

Meeting: July 20, 2021

#### **Subject**

Consider Blackberry Farm Golf Course Feasibility Study Options (includes options for minimal repairs, a renovated golf course, and returning the golf course to natural habitat); provide direction to staff.

#### **Recommended Action**

1. Direct staff to update the study for minimal repairs to the golf course (Option 1) and to study returning the golf course to natural habitat (Option 3).
2. Approve Budget Modification Number 2122-148 to appropriate \$26,400 for these studies.

#### **Background**

The Blackberry Farm Golf Course was constructed in 1962 and was privately owned until 1991 when the City purchased the property (Attachment A, site map). The current irrigation system is from the course's original installation, has asbestos concrete pipes, and has outlived its intended lifecycle by over 30 years.

In 2014, a new Master Plan for the Stevens Creek Corridor was initiated, consistent with a capital improvement project adopted and funded by the City Council for that fiscal year. Its goal was to create an updated vision and plan for the public lands along Stevens Creek, from McClellan Road northward to Stevens Creek Boulevard. Among the sites addressed by this Master Plan was the Blackberry Farm Golf Course. City Council reviewed several options for the creek corridor in addition to a feasibility study regarding the Blackberry Farm Golf Course, prepared by National Golf Foundation (NGF) Consulting.

The feasibility study for the Blackberry Farm Golf Course was discussed at a study session in December 2014 that was continued to February 2015. There was significant public comment at the time. Forty-seven unique speakers gave public comment at Commission and Council meetings. Of these 47, nine individuals were in favor of keeping the golf course, 12 were in favor of minimal change to the course or a return to natural habitat, and 18 who supported a complete return to natural habitat. The comments from the remaining eight speakers were not directly related to the golf course.

Many indicated an interest in an alternative option to return the golf course to natural habitat. The Audubon Society proposed their own option for the corridor which included a recommendation to either redesign the golf course to be natural and sustainable or restore it to a natural meadow or forest with walking trails. This alternate option was supported by the Audubon Society, Sierra Club, Committee for Green Foothills, Acterra, and many people in the community. Of the councilmembers, two were supportive of a par 3 course, two were in favor of fixing the irrigation, and one supported conversion of the golf course into natural habitat.

In 2016, a feasibility study for a draft preferred alternative for the golf course was presented to the City Council. It included information for a recommended renovation of the golf course and additional financial information (Attachment B). The conceptual plan for the golf course included a shorter par-3 layout on a smaller footprint, a nature-themed putting course, a short game practice area, a relocated clubhouse/restaurant that would incorporate a golf shop, grill, golf practice hitting bays, and space that could accommodate meetings and events for up to 200 people, conversion of the Blesch home to parking and creek restoration, and a foot bridge to the trail. This alternative did not include a new park entry road from Stevens Creek Boulevard. Seven speakers gave public comment at the Council meeting. Of these seven, four were supportive of the preferred alternative, one was in favor of minimal repairs, and two comments were not specific to the golf course portion of the plan. The City Council chose not to take any action at that time, and the Stevens Creek Corridor Master Plan was put on hold until completion of the Parks and Recreation System Master Plan. The Parks and Recreation System Master Plan was completed and adopted February 18, 2020. The current FY 21-22 City Council Work Program includes an item to identify options for short and long-term improvements for the golf course.

### **Discussion**

The City revisited the golf course feasibility study options prepared by National Golf Foundation Consulting and prior discussions by Council and the public. Based on this review, staff is seeking direction on whether to:

- 1) Update the feasibility study to perform minimal repairs for the golf course.
- 2) Update the feasibility study for renovating the golf course to a layout similar to the 2016 preferred alternative in Attachment B. This would include a shorter par 3 layout with a nature-themed putting course, a short game practice area, a relocated clubhouse/restaurant that would incorporate a golf shop, grill, golf practice hitting bays, and space that could accommodate meetings and events for up to 200 people, conversion of the Blesch home to parking and creek restoration, and a foot bridge to the trail.
- 3) Conduct a feasibility study to return the golf course to natural habitat.

### Option 1: Minimal Repairs

Minimal Repairs would replace and improve irrigation, netting, tee boxes, greens, and areas around the greens including the fringe and sand traps, as well as replace the ponds with lowland native area. This option does not add new amenities and is likely to need the highest continuing subsidy. This option would keep the 1,544-yard, par 29 course and is estimated to cost at least \$1,100,000.

#### Irrigation System:

The 65-year-old irrigation system is inefficient, wastes water, and requires constant maintenance. Modern irrigation systems are divided into approximately 60-foot sections of watering which can be controlled individually, for specific amounts of time. The system at Blackberry Farm is a hydraulic system that waters 180-foot sections, with no control over the area watered. For example, the first and ninth holes, which are adjacent, must be watered at the same time, whether or not they need it. The turf maintenance crew was able to change 40 valves to battery operation which allows them to control the timing in a more efficient manner; however, this temporary fix does require additional maintenance to replace the batteries. Leaks in the irrigation system require fixing around six to eight times per year. Each time a pipe needs to be fixed, the water lines are drained, wasting approximately 10,000 gallons of water annually. In addition, the longer irrigation replacement is deferred, the higher the likelihood of a water main failure. If the water main were to break and the water entered the creek, this would be toxic to the fish, including the federally protected steelhead trout. Typically, a maintenance crew spends 2-3 hours per week hand watering a golf course. The Blackberry Farm crew spends 2-3 hours per day. A new irrigation system would allow them to spend more time on proper care of the surrounding hillsides, green complexes, and landscaping. The average water consumption at the golf course is 8.3 million gallons per year, with the average cost being \$58,000. Water costs are expected to increase 14% next year, followed by consecutive annual increases of 4% and 5%. A new irrigation system is expected to cut usage by approximately 22-30% and would result in a savings of approximately \$18,000 per year, based on current rates.

#### Netting:

Netting that previously served as a barrier between the golf course and trail along the eight and nine holes has fallen. To continue protecting the trail, the netting needs to be replaced.

#### Tees and Greens:

Tee boxes and putting greens crown over time and require replacement every few years to make them level. To ensure the tees and greens are playable, they need to be replaced.

#### Pond Replacement:

The ponds previously received water through a diversion system which brought water from the creek but stopped functioning in 2007 when the creek levels dropped. The ponds have been empty since then and the diversion system was abandoned. The City

focused resources on filling the ponds in 2011 and researched utilizing the well at Blackberry Farm as a water source. However, it was found that the upper pond, which feeds water to the lower pond, leaked, and would not hold water. It is recommended that the empty ponds be converted to over one acre of lowland native area. These plants would require minimal watering.

#### Option 2: Preferred Alternative Renovated Course

Renovating the golf course would require a new irrigation system, replacement of the poles and netting as needed, and replacement of the dry ponds with lowland native areas at a minimum. Based on the feedback from Council and the public, pursuing a golf course renovation similar to the preferred alternative in 2016 is a potential option. This would be a family friendly short course. It would include a fully rebuilt short par 3, returning loops to allow for 3, 4, 5, 7, 9-hole play, larger short game and player development area with virtual hitting bays, and a nature-themed putting course for all ages. This would also include a relocated clubhouse/restaurant that would incorporate a golf shop, grill, and space that could accommodate meetings and events for up to 200 people, conversion of the Blesch home to parking and creek restoration, and a foot bridge to the trail. This would result in a 1,035-yard, par 27 course. This option would cost an estimated \$10,000 to update the pricing and financial information from the 2016 report. In the 2016 report, construction of the golf course was estimated to cost at least \$2,500,000 and the clubhouse/restaurant building construction costs were estimated at a minimum of \$3,600,000.

#### Golf Course Usage:

The Blackberry Farm Golf Course averages approximately 28,000 rounds of golf per year, which is 35% fewer than its nearby competitors.

Golf Round Comparison		
	Rounds Pre-COVID	Rounds in COVID
Cupertino - Blackberry Farm (9M)	28,000	41,000
Sunnyvale - Sunken Gardens (9M)	43,000	53,000
San Jose - Rancho Del Pueblo (9M)	25,000	40,000
San Jose - Santa Teresa (9PO)	19,000	29,000
Cupertino - Deep Cliff (18PO)	48,000	65,000

Approximately 39% of those that use the golf course are residents of Cupertino. The course is subsidized by the general fund approximately \$300,000 (49%) annually. This is consistent with other Parks and Recreation Department programs that have varying degrees of resident and non-resident participation and general fund subsidy levels. For example, 47% of those that use the Blackberry Farm pool and picnic area are residents and the facility is subsidized by the general fund approximately 77% annually.

### Option 3: Returning Golf Course to Natural Habitat

Visitors to the Stevens Creek Corridor number approximately 55,000 on an annual basis. This total does not include the program participants at McClellan Ranch, Blackberry Farm, and the Blackberry Farm golf course. Closure of the golf course could return the area to a natural riparian habitat and connect to the Stevens Creek Trail. This option would cost at least \$50,000 for a feasibility study and, in 2016, was estimated at \$1,500,000 to complete the conversion. The Stevens Creek Corridor contains various protected and sensitive habitats and wildlife species, such as the steelhead trout, that are protected by law. The corridor, including the golf course, is in a flood plain, and expected to flood periodically. While the area has not experienced a major flood since 1998, portions of the course as well as the pro shop building were under water during that time.

Due to the constraints surrounding what is allowed in a flood plain and this type of sensitive habitat, there are limitations regarding the type of facility that can exist in place of the golf course. The course itself is an acceptable neighbor to the corridor and the animals that live within. It is quiet, has over 75 trees, and has the potential to add more native plants to its landscape. Any type of facility that would require lights or may produce sound louder than the sound produced by a golf course, may fail to meet regulations that protect habitat and wildlife in the corridor.

### Parks and Recreation System Master Plan

The Parks and Recreation System Master Plan provides the following direction when the City embarks on a program of strategic reinvestment in and renovation or expansion of major facilities.

- Strive to meet the priorities of the community.
- Evaluate the benefit before doing a like-for-like replacement. Consider repurposing, or a more significant remodel to retool the current inventory of facilities and better meet community needs.
- Consider new trends and needs, as well as the preferences of nearby neighbors, before replacing amenities or facilities at the end of their lifecycle. Avoid replacing failing amenities and facilities in-kind without reviewing current needs.

The Master Plan also suggests that any renovation to the Blackberry Farm Golf Course provide improved habitat value. Future decisions regarding the golf course property should respect the site's unique creek-side location and emphasize choices that are compatible with increased ecological value.

As part of the Parks and Recreation System Master Plan process, an Activity Participation Survey was conducted in 2017 (Attachment C). Survey results indicate that 16.8% of residents who participated in the survey, participate in the sport of golf, or use

a driving range. This survey also shows that 67% of residents who participated in the survey, walk for pleasure or fitness, and take part in nature walks or hikes.

Nature Experience was one of the key themes garnered from the community outreach for the Parks and Recreation Master Plan. Expanding access to nature is a top priority for the community. Throughout all outreach activities, participants consistently favored incorporating nature and increasing access to natural open space over other potential enhancements. 85% of survey respondents noted that improving access to natural open space is desired in the City.

### **Parks and Recreation Commission Recommendation**

On June 3, the Parks and Recreation Commission unanimously recommended to City Council to update feasibility study for Option 1 (minimal repairs) and to continue with a feasibility study for Option 3 (return to habitat). Commissioners expressed a desire for a better understanding of the cost associated with the return to nature option (Option 3) for an accurate comparison and indicated that there might be partnership or grant opportunities to offset costs for Options 1 and 3. The studies would result in updated cost estimates for a more accurate comparison. The Commission also noted that a lot of the email communication that they received from the public was in support of either Option 1 or Option 3, and not option two as many did not want a fully renovated course.

### **Next Steps**

Based on the recommendation from City Council, the next steps would include conducting feasibility studies on the selected option(s). Once the studies are complete, public outreach will be conducted on the option(s) selected, including a landing page on the City's website, a citywide mailer, a community survey, and a community meeting. The study and outreach results would then be brought back to Parks and Recreation Commission and City Council for consideration and could be included as a future Capital Improvement Program (CIP) project.

### **Sustainability Impact**

Any of the options would replace an old irrigation system that is inefficient and wastes water. This would decrease the amount of water used.

### **Fiscal Impact**

Option 1 and Option 2 were considered in 2014 and 2016 respectively and would require updates to the studies for updated pricing and considerations. Option 3 would require a new study. The estimated costs of each option are shown below:

<b>Study Options</b>	<b>Study Cost</b>	<b>Est. Construction Cost</b>
<b>Option 1:</b> Minimal Repairs	\$8,400 (update)	\$1,100,000 (from 2014)
<b>Option 2:</b> Preferred Alternative Renovated Course	\$30,000 (update)	\$2,500,000 (golf course) \$3,600,000 (clubhouse) (from 2016)
<b>Option 3:</b> Returning Golf Course to Natural Habitat	\$60,000 (new study)	\$1,500,000 (from 2014)

\*A desire to study additional golf options would increase the consultant fees.

Once these studies have been completed, it is expected to cost an estimated \$8,000 for outreach, including costs for a citywide mailer and community meeting.

Currently, the golf course study City Work Program item has been allocated \$50,000. An increased allocation may be required depending on which options Council chooses. The additional allocation of \$26,400 reflected in the recommended action is to accommodate the Parks and Recreation Commission's recommendation to pursue Options 1 and 3.

#### Annual General Fund Subsidy

Currently, the golf course is subsidized by the general fund by approximately \$300,000 annually. Performing minimal repairs (Option 1) would lower the subsidy required by approximately \$18,000 annually due to water savings. The preferred alternative renovated course option (Option 2) has the potential to significantly reduce or eliminate the annual subsidy required due to the various improvements it includes and this will be estimated as part of the study if this option is selected. If the natural habitat option is selected (Option 3), it is estimated to require an ongoing annual subsidy of \$200,000 for maintenance (est. \$126,000) and ranger functions (est. \$95,000), which could be offset by revenue generating ranger programming (est. \$20,000).

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Approved by: Dianne Thompson, Assistant City Manager

#### Attachments:

A – Existing Conditions Site Map

B – Golf Course Preferred Alternative Conceptual Plan

C – Activity Participation Survey