



Parks & Recreation

Ground Floor
411 West First Street
Duluth, Minnesota 55802



218-730-4300



parks@duluthmn.gov

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Decision Not to Open Lester Golf Course One of Many Necessary Community Sacrifices

Dear Golfers,

On Monday, April 20, Mayor Emily Larson announced changes to summer 2020 plans for a variety of City of Duluth parks and recreation facilities. The changes are among many necessitated by an unprecedented crisis that is, at once, the worst public health emergency since the 1918 flu outbreak and the worst economic collapse since the Great Depression. At the City of Duluth, the economic collapse threatens to decrease 2020 revenues by up to \$25 million, enough to jeopardize the City's ability to sustain essential services.

These unique circumstances require parks leaders to take decisive action of two sorts. First, traditional City-supported recreational activities must either be reconfigured to prevent disease transmission or stopped altogether. Second, the cost of every City-supported recreational activity must be reduced in order to preserve funding for essential services like police and fire.

Acting under state and local emergency orders necessitated by the speed and severity of the pandemic, City leaders are undertaking a comprehensive review of all City-supported recreational activities. One by one, the City has been adapting recreational activities that can continue to operate safely, ceasing or restricting those activities that cannot be adapted, and cutting costs wherever we can.

This process has produced an ongoing series of painful but necessary decisions that impose some level of sacrifice and disappointment for all recreational user groups. Attractions like Spirit Mountain and the Lake Superior Zoo remain closed with the uncertain hope that they may reopen later this summer. Children are indefinitely prohibited from using public playgrounds. Athletic fields have not been opened for spring sports leagues. The City will be announcing additional parks-related restrictions and postponements in the coming weeks. All Duluthians are impacted, but our safety as a community must come first.

Some of the decisions thus far have focused narrowly on public health but many also include significant cost cutting. The City has withheld portions of budgeted tourism tax subsidies for the zoo and Spirit Mountain and notified both that they may not receive the remainder of their allocations. The City has indefinitely postponed plans to hire its usual seasonal park maintenance workforce, a decision that will significantly reduce the City's capacity to maintain ballfields, courts, gardens, trails, and parks throughout the summer. And, this week, the City sent temporary layoff notices to nearly fifty employees, including one-third of the hard-working employees of the City's Property, Parks, and Libraries Department.

The Mayor's April 20 announcement included specific changes to the operation of Duluth's public golf program for 2020. The announcement about golf was two-fold:

1. The City will require its golf management firm, Billy Casper Golf, to submit a comprehensive Duluth Golf pandemic operations plan that will effectively prevent disease transmission at our courses. Operational adaptations include strict limits on the number of golfers who may be on the course or in golf buildings at one time and elaborate arrangements to prevent multiple people from touching the same unsanitized objects. We are confident that these requirements will prevent unsafe crowding and minimize the exchange of potentially infectious material. While necessary and appropriate from a public health perspective, these adaptations will substantially worsen the financial performance of a golf program that lost more than \$150,000 in 2019, causing direct impacts on the City's operating budget. By simultaneously reducing

revenue per round and reducing the total number of rounds, these changes make Duluth Golf significantly more expensive to operate in 2020.

2. In light of the impact of the pandemic on City revenues and the impact of pandemic operational adaptations on golf course economics, the City must reduce the impact of Duluth Golf's operating losses on the city's budget by operating just one course in 2020, Enger Park Golf Course. Lester Park Golf Course will be minimally maintained to protect infrastructure but remain closed for golf.

As the City's administration works to minimize layoffs and impacts to essential services during the pandemic, operating two golf courses that are not financially independent is not feasible. The City of Duluth could have achieved some of the same cost savings by only opening Lester this year and leaving Enger closed. We did not do so for a number of reasons foremost among which are the greater accessibility of the centrally located Enger facility and City Council designation of Enger as our flagship course.

Duluth Parks and Recreation sincerely regrets that we will not be able to open Lester Park Golf Course this year. We understand that, for many citizens, golf is a primary way to stay active and healthy, connect with friends and family, and enjoy the natural world. We also understand that, for some of our golfers, it is not just golf in general but golf at Lester that is particularly cherished. For these golfers, the inability to play at Lester in 2020 is a painful loss.

Some Lester golfers have requested refunds for their 2020 season passes. Those who have already purchased a pass have two options:

1. Accept a full refund and the pass will be canceled
2. Keep the pass and accept no refund

Golfers must submit a refund request by Friday, May 8. Golfers who use already purchased annual passes before May 8 will forfeit the opportunity to request a refund. The refund policy and contact information may be found at <https://www.golfduluth.com/>.

The announcement that Lester will not open in 2020 has prompted much speculation. Some of the speculation has been incorrect. Among the myths is the concern that opening only one course will result in unsafe crowding. In fact, pandemic operating restrictions that require off-site, advance reservations and strictly limit the number of golfers on the course have been carefully designed to preclude the possibility of unsafe crowding.

Other speculation has been more or less on-target. Duluth golfers may, in fact, have more difficulty finding a desirable tee time this summer, they may play fewer rounds of golf over the course of the year, and league play may be impacted. These are real sacrifices that we are sorry to have to impose. At the same time, Duluth Parks and Recreation respectfully asserts that, in the context of the current global crisis, such sacrifices are necessary, reasonable, and appropriate. All Duluthians are feeling the impact.

On Wednesday, April 23, I notified two Parks and Recreation employees of their layoff status. And, under the City-wide hiring freeze, we will hold one additional position open until further notice. Additionally, four Park Maintenance workers received their lay off notifications on Wednesday. All told, our small but strong team of 14 Parks and Recreation staff is currently operating with 11 staff members. We are monitoring every line in our operating budget for additional cost savings measures, and continuing to bring customer service, value added, and distance recreation to our community.

Thank you,



Jessica Peterson
Parks and Recreation Manager
City of Duluth

