



SUBJECT: Recommendations for the evolution of Tyandaga Golf Course

TO: Committee of the Whole

FROM: Recreation, Community and Culture

Report Number: RCC-04-24

Wards Affected: all

Date to Committee: March 4, 2024

Date to Council: March 19, 2024

Recommendation:

Direct the Director of Recreation, Community and Culture to retain Tyandaga Golf Course as an 18-hole course as outlined in recreation, community and culture report RCC-04-24 and provide an operational update in 5-years' time (2029); and

Approve a by-law substantially as shown in Appendix C to recreation, community and culture report RCC-04-24, being a by-law to create a Tyandaga Golf Course Reserve Fund and direct the Director of Recreation, Community and Culture to include a 5% surcharge through the 2025 budget that would contribute to the Reserve Fund and the future capital enhancement of the golf course.

PURPOSE:

Vision to Focus Alignment:

- Support sustainable infrastructure and a resilient environment
- Deliver customer centric services with a focus on efficiency and technology transformation

Executive Summary:

In September 2023, staff brought forward a report to Committee, [RCC-15-23](#) with the following staff direction:

“Direct the Director of Recreation, Community and Culture to commence engagement with the community regarding the Evolution of Tyandaga Golf Course as outlined in RCC-15-23 and report back in Q4 2023 with operations for consideration including engagement results”.

This review was initiated by staff due to various factors:

- Safety concerns on hole 18, similar to those previously encountered on hole 14 in 2015.
- Concerns about Tyandaga’s overall footprint (108 acres) to safely house an 18-hole course.
- Changing golf trends, notably the rise in popularity of 9-hole courses.
- Community feedback expressing a desire for additional greenspace amenities.
- Desire to better serve our community having just recently (as of 2021) slowly been phasing the Tyandaga Golf Course operation into a tax supported service.

Following Council’s support of the community engagement approach, staff began consulting with Tyandaga residents, golfers, Burlington residents, and users of the outdoor amenity, to name a few. Staff collected feedback through an online survey and held various in-person and online engagement sessions. The objective of these sessions was to gather additional input from all parties around the idea of a different golf course as well as creative uses of the greenspace on the Tyandaga property. A resounding theme from the engagement was an ask for transparency from the community; they wished to access all information pertaining to Tyandaga’s property and operation including the various safety reports. Following the engagement and to satisfy the community’s wish for transparency, Councillors Bentivegna and Galbraith brought forward Motion Memo – Tyandaga Golf Course safety reports ([EICS-C-05-23](#)) before Committee, requesting that Council waive privilege and release the reports. The Motion Memo was supported and approved on December 12, 2023.

Background and Discussion:

In 2022, Tyandaga received claims of numerous incidents concerning Hole 18, prompting the hiring of a golf consultant to assess the situation and provide risk mitigation recommendations. The consultant’s [Report](#) advised the City to immediately change Hole 18 to improve safety. Staff chose to convert Hole 18 from a Par 4 to a Par 3, however, this change resulted in an overall increase of Par 3’s to 7; more than any other non-executive course in Burlington and surrounding areas. Hole 14 had also previously changed to a Par 3, in 2015, for similar reasons.

Despite safety being the driver behind the modifications to Hole 18, staff received numerous complaints about the changes. These objections stemmed from concerns about excessive Par 3s on the course and the dissatisfaction of ending the course on a Par 3; both of which negatively impact the player's experience today. The ongoing reduction of Tyandaga's holes could also lead to the downgrading of the course, rendering it potentially unplayable or less enjoyable in the future.

During the review of Hole 18, the Consultant also alluded to other potential risks on the course and it was at that time that staff retained the consultant to do a full examination of the course. Out of the total 18 holes, two additional holes (Hole number 4 and 5) were identified as either currently having or with the potential of becoming similar risks due to their placement. Risk mitigation options such as installing netting or planting trees were reviewed but at the time deemed suboptimal. The cost associated with purchasing, installing, and maintaining netting, including the seasonal setup and takedown, was also deemed prohibitive. Planting mature trees was considered another possibility; however, this option was also deemed costly, and the risk of tree survival added another layer of concern.

At this time, staff began to consider various options for the evolution of Tyandaga Golf Course, including, but not limited to the conversion to a 9-hole course. Staff brought forward report [RCC-15-23](#) to Committee and began engaging with the community to gauge feedback on transitioning to a 9-hole golf course with the following goals in mind:

1. Addressing safety concerns,
2. Enhancing player experience, and
3. Maximizing the utilization of green spaces.

However, as detailed in the engagement section of the report, the feedback received from residents and golfers indicated a strong preference for retaining the 18-hole course rather than exploring the possibilities of a 9-hole layout. Furthermore, residents were extremely concerned about potential development on parts of the golf course earmarked to be used for greenspace, despite reassurances from both Council members and staff that development would not be an option at this time. The comment remained that opening the space to more passive use, landed itself more readily available for any development in the future, and a possible solution to addressing Burlington's housing shortage.

Internally, staff had many discussions around risk and risk tolerance. This question continued to surface; "what is an acceptable level of risk for the city to take on given inherent risk to the game of golf?" It is evident that as an operator, it is the City's responsibility to mitigate as many of the risks possible.

In late December, staff reviewed all the information received to date and was preparing a report back to Committee with all this information. The intent was to have an open conversation regarding risks, feedback received, and criteria used to essentially land a recommendation for the future evolution of Tyandaga. However, concurrently staff dug deeper into the safety reports and came up with some very effective measures to mitigate a lot of the residual risk. As such, by means of this report, staff are bringing forward facts, criteria, and an overall recommendation to maintain the golf operations as an 18-hole given the resounding support from the community. Staff is suggesting that the City move forward with the investments in capital to better improve the player experience and report back by 2029 (5-year cycle) on the success of the operation.

Strategy/process/risk

The decision-making process encompassed a comprehensive assessment, taking into account several key factors, including:

- Examination of market trends between a 9-hole, 12-hole and 18-hole golf operation.
- Conducting community engagement sessions to understand community preferences. Staff initially focused on engaging on a 9-hole layout and amenities, including demand for greenspace enhancements based on previous community feedback.
- Reviewed consultant's findings, pinpointing safety hazards and proposing mitigation strategies, both internal and external.
- Assessed financial aspects to gauge the sustainability of a 9-hole course versus maintaining it as an 18-hole facility.
- Formulated strategies to bolster the course's sustainability and customer service, including increasing youth participation, improving facilities, and identifying necessary capital investments through grant applications.

Staff narrowed it down to the most critical factors for consideration when putting together feasible options for consideration. These factors include:

1. **Safety and Risk Mitigation:** Golf, as a sport, carries both internal and external inherent risks. Internal risks include stray golf balls or inexperienced golfers taking shots at unpredictable angles. External risks include balls landing out of bounds and potentially causing damage to surrounding homes. As a golf operator, it is the City's responsibility to implement reasonable measures to ensure persons entering the golf course remain reasonably safe. In 2023, the City converted Hole 18 from a Par 4 to a Par 3 and this change helped mitigate various safety issues on that hole. However, external risks, as identified in Miller Golf's Safety reports, exist on Hole 4 and 5

whereby the homes adjacent to these holes could be damaged by stray balls. It should be noted that we have had very few complaints from these holes in the last five years. The consultant also made note that Hole 6 was also adjacent to homes, however a fence was erected and there have been no complaints to date regarding stray balls. Holes 9, 15, and 16 were identified as potentially having safety risks to surrounding naturalized areas or the tennis courts; however, no homes are adjacent, and no complaints have been logged. Lastly, Holes 14 and 18 were identified as posing a higher risk, however, their conversion to a Par 3 seems to have mitigated these concerns. To further mitigate risks, particularly on Holes 4 and 5 which are adjacent to residential properties, staff would explore various measures to increase safety including but not limited to: updating tee boxes to improve sight lines, managing sand traps to guide focus towards the green, installing netting where needed, and exploring tree planting for continued protection to adjacent homes. Regular course inspections will address potential hazards, and additional risk signage will promote safety awareness, ensuring an enjoyable experience for all patrons. Other internal risks could be mitigated through cart paths whereby golfers would be forced to stay on an assigned route as opposed to driving anywhere on the course to get from one hole to the other. Internal and external risks could also be reduced by changing the order of the holes, reducing the distance, or modifying hitting angles as well as through an overall reduction in the course such as the conversion to a 9 or 12-hole course.

- 2. Customer Experience:** It is imperative that the experience for both golfers and greenspace users be a positive one. This can be achieved through beautification of the course and amenities, maintaining and/or increasing service levels, and pro-actively meeting consumer needs (e.g. adding a practice warm-up area if required by the membership and green fee players). Most of the tee boxes are from the original golf course design and over time, have become crowned, leaving a less desirable playing surface for the golfers. The absence of golf cart paths creates an environment less appealing to golfers. There is an opportunity to improve the overall experience at Tyandaga by enhancing both the aesthetic appeal and golfing amenities, aiming to better attract and satisfy golf enthusiasts. Other aspects of the customer experience include the booking process, checking in process, food services, overall satisfaction with the infrastructure (golf carts and clubhouse), to name a few. As of 2021, Tyandaga has been slowly phasing out its net zero operation and is moving towards being a fully tax supported service in 2024. During its net zero operation, the ability to invest in the course depended solely on the margin of its profits. Although the golf operation has been doing well over the last 5 years or so, the favorability after including all operating expenses and capital renewals was marginal which means that the City has not been able to invest significant dollars into improving the course and its overall customer experience.

3. **Environmental Impacts:** Tyandaga has many naturalized areas which enhance flora, save on water, reduce carbon emissions, create wildlife habitats, reduce maintenance costs, and allow staff to focus resources on primary areas of the golf course. Tyandaga Golf Course is also located in the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark boundary and includes over many hectares of public urban woodlands. These woodlands are key natural features that are a part of a larger ecological network that expands well beyond the City of Burlington borders. They have significant benefit as they help species adapt to climate change, they connect various habitat types needed for species' different life stages, including migration and support vital ecosystem services like provision of food and clean air, as well as nutrient, and water cycles. Any enhancements (e.g. new plantings) or improved maintenance (e.g. removal of invasive species) of these woodlands should be a consideration of the future state of the Tyandaga property. It would be in alignment with the Cootes to Escarpment Management Plan(s) and the City's Urban Forest Management Plan. For additional details specifically related to climate change, refer to the "Climate Implications" section of this report.
4. **Feasibility:** As a tax-supported service, it is imperative that the City consider the tax impact on any service enhancements. For example, the return on investment for the various future enhancements the City wishes to make in the course/priority. While an 18-hole setup continues to generate revenue, it also incurs significant capital costs compared to a 9-hole course. Despite projecting approximately half the revenue of an 18-hole course, it could take some time to re-establish a new 9-hole golfing clientele, but once established, a 9-hole course offers potential for profitability. Staff explored avenues to subsidize the 9-hole course, considering options like a driving range, but community feedback strongly opposed investing in these types of amenities.
5. **Market Analysis:** Currently, golf courses across Ontario offer a variety of different year-round experiences, technological options, affordability, and number of holes. Furthermore, golf is increasingly being positioned as a sport contributing to overall wellness and helping to promote an active lifestyle. Golf courses encompass numerous social opportunities, diverse playing experiences, full or partial day enjoyment, and excellent physical and mental health benefits. A recent trend in the industry shows a growing preference for time-efficient golf experiences, with increased popularity in 9-hole rounds. In 2023, Golfnow recently reported a 40% year-over-year rise in 9-hole tee time bookings in the industry. Tyandaga currently offers a mix of 9-hole and 18-hole golf experiences throughout the weekdays. Four of the five weekdays are comprised of both 18-hole and 9-hole league play events that appeal to all skill levels of golfers. Tyandaga has the flexibility to maintain or potentially increase their 9-hole tee time offerings based on demand, while still retaining its status as an 18-hole course for those who prefer to play 18 holes.

Tyandaga is currently ranked at 3.5 out of 5 stars by user groups on Golfnow. This ranking is amongst the lowest in the area, mainly attributed to minimal investments in significant capital needs. Tyandaga would attract and retain more user groups year-round by offering golf cart paths/walking paths, improving the current aging irrigation system, and repairing or rebuilding several crowned tee box areas.

Tyandaga's geographical location is excellent, drawing golfers from large markets such as Toronto, Hamilton, and the Niagara Region. Many public golfers currently travel up to one hour to play golf at an affordable facility. Burlington currently has 9 golf facilities and there are approximately 800 across Ontario. Golf Ontario reports that 451 of these facilities are 18-holes, 231 are 9-holes and the rest of the facilities are comprised of 12, 27, 36 and 45+ hole facilities. Tyandaga is currently maintained and priced according to its 3.5-star rating. The current state of golf in southern Ontario is very strong. While 18-hole courses maintain their allure, the rise in 9-hole options indicates a shift towards more flexible and affordable play. Tyandaga has proven to be a successful 18-hole course, while also offering 9-hole play for leagues, tournaments or daily green fee players looking for an affordable and more time-efficient round. Additional information regarding market trends can be found in Appendix B.

Next Steps

In 2024, Tyandaga will maintain its operations as an 18-hole golf course. Ongoing safety improvements include the removal of ash trees, tree cutting to improve sightlines, implementing risk signage, repair, and installation of necessary netting near housing, and considering additional tree plantings for residential coverage. The assessment of tee boxes improvements and sand trap alterations will undergo further review, and implementation will commence upon securing suitable companies for both projects.

To enhance the golfer's experience, a practice area will be created, and youth clinics will be added to the program menu. A Tyandaga Committee will furthermore be formed to ensure continuous community input on the improvements of Tyandaga, such as reviewing additional winter activities to implement in the off-season. Exploration of available grants could provide opportunities to accelerate capital improvements such as adding in cart paths as well as linking hiking trails from Kerncliff Park to Tyandaga, both of which would increase safety as well as customer experience.

Tyandaga will furthermore establish a new Tyandaga Golf Course Reserve Fund, allocating 5% of all membership and green fee revenues, approximately \$50k per year, to this fund. This change aims to assist with funding customer enhancements on the course and property. Additionally, staff plan on implementing initiatives such as capping

memberships and introducing a non-resident fee to ensure a fair and equitable player experience for both residents, non-residents, members, and green fee players.

In 2025, following consultations with the new Tyandaga Committee, various holes will be repositioned to enhance the course's walking-friendly features. There is also a possibility of assessing all holes to enhance the overall enjoyment, with a specific focus on optimizing playability for Hole 18. Additionally, decreasing the distance between holes will help reduce the average round time to align with the trend of quicker game play.

Furthermore, an annual review of sightlines and hole safety claims will be conducted to proactively address concerns. Staff will provide a comprehensive report to Council in 2029, assessing operational success and ongoing risk mitigation efforts.

Options Considered

Based on the above considerations, staff considered remaining status quo as well as changing Tyandaga to a 9-hole or 12-hole course.

The below chart identifies each option and how it aligns with the considerations in the strategy and discussion section of the report.

Option	Considerations Addressed (Y/N)			
	Safety and Risk Mitigation	Customer Experience	Environmental Impacts	Feasibility
18-hole - Status Quo	N	N	Y	Y
9 or 12-hole course with additional green space amenities	Y	Y	Y	N
18 hole – with changes based on community input incl. safety mitigation	Y	Y	Y	Y

As evident from the chart above, maintaining the status quo would only fulfill the feasibility aspect outlined. Conversely, retaining Tyandaga as an 18-hole course, guided by valuable community feedback, merits consideration for further improvements that would address not only the feasibility option but would also increase customer experience and continue to decrease safety and risk mitigation.

Financial Matters:

In 2024, Tyandaga has transitioned to a fully tax-supported model. Up until this point, it operated as a net zero, that meant that any operating profits of the course would be deposited in a reserve fund to be used for capital improvements or potential operating losses. Unfortunately, operating profits were insufficient to cover the full capital needs of the course, which meant that for years, projects were deferred, resulting in a large backlog of capital needs.

Over the last few years, the course has seen some profits which means that its reserve fund has a positive balance of approx. \$315k. In addition, there is \$1.215 million of previously approved, but not yet spent, capital funding as part of the Park Design and Construction capital program, in addition to facility capital dollars. Much of this relates to the postponement of capital projects pending a decision on how to evolve Tyandaga. Now that the course has transitioned to a tax supported model, additional tax supported funding can also be used to support the course's capital needs.

While \$1.215 million appears to be a substantial sum of money, the funds would be used for critical investments to maintain and increase safety such as implementation of netting, altering sand traps, planting of trees for future risk mitigation, safety signage, levelling of tees and much needed cart paths are close to this total amount. Furthermore, there are additional projects necessitating replacement, such as the irrigation system, alongside the consideration of other asset replacement and associated lifecycle expenses.

A review of assets would need to be completed to determine prioritization of projects and as with each capital budget process, the needs at Tyandaga will be assessed in context with other park and facility renewal schedules and prioritized accordingly. Staff will also regularly explore external grant funding opportunities to generate additional funding revenue streams.

Lastly, staff are recommending the establishment of a new Tyandaga Golf Course Reserve Fund that would be funded by a 5% surcharge applied to rates. The reserve fund by-law can be found in Appendix C. As membership sales have already happened, it is too late to alter rates and fees at this time, therefore this change will be implemented for the 2025 season.

Climate Implications:

Burlington has been experiencing many extreme weather events that have negatively affected the golf industry throughout southern Ontario. The climate crisis directly affects the overall operations, causing later openings and early closures to the golf season and many extreme weather closures all of which negatively impacted the overall financial

performance. Additional space can furthermore allow for naturalization to occur, such as the addition of native plants and hiking trails, pollinator gardens, rain gardens, or wildlife habitats to name a few. These examples allow for the restoration of natural ecosystems, in addition to enhancing biodiversity within the neighbourhood.

Engagement Matters:

In September and October, staff coordinated various public engagement initiatives, hosting six in-person events, including Food for Feedback, Appleby Streetfest, three face-to-face engagements, and one online event. An additional in-person event was added at Tyandaga due to the first Tyandaga engagement session being at capacity.

Additionally, a survey was conducted through the Get Involved platform. These endeavors led to the active involvement of 168 residents in face-to-face interactions and 548 completed surveys or online participations. 79% of survey participants were golfers or had previously golfed at Tyandaga. The recurring feedback from this community conveyed a strong preference for maintaining the golf course as an 18-hole facility.

Top 5 comments on changes to the current 18-hole course:

- Improve golf course maintenance, cart paths, tee boxes and greens.
- Add netting or plant mature trees to reduce risk areas.
- More opportunities for youth, including youth camps/leagues.
- Creation/improvement of a practice facility.
- Already have many greenspace options in Tyandaga – improve the parkland that already exists (i.e., Kerncliff park) and connect Tyandaga with the Bruce trail system.

Top 5 comments on changes to the recreational use of Tyandaga:

- More winter programming, ice rink, snowshoeing/cross country skiing.
- Accessible paths for walking/biking year-round.
- More recreational opportunities such as
 - Dog walking
 - Nature hikes
 - Biking paths
 - Volleyball
 - Disc golf year round
 - Leash free area
 - Outdoor volleyball courts

We heard that the areas that participants valued about Tyandaga:

- Maintaining the space as greenspace – no development.
- Usage of the golf course and tennis courts.
- Access to greenspace.
- Winter Park activities such as tobogganing, walking and play.
- A recreation space for families and neighborhoods to gather and play.

Conclusion:

Tyandaga is truly a cherished asset within the City of Burlington. Investing additional and essential funds will contribute to the ongoing enhancement of Tyandaga, restoring it to the beautiful 18-hole golf course it once exemplified as well as continuing to mitigate risk. Staff will phase in the various risk mitigation strategies mentioned in this report over the next few years with the hopes of increasing the overall player experience concurrently to mitigating safety concerns. Staff will be reporting back in 2029 to Committee to provide a fulsome operational update.

Respectfully submitted,

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Brad Weake
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Appendices:

- A. Safety Risk Analysis
- B. Market Analysis
- C. By-law XX-2024 Tyandaga Golf Course Reserve Fund

Report Approval:

All reports are reviewed and/or approved by Department Director, the Chief Financial Officer and the Executive Director of Legal Services & Corporation Counsel.