

Rock Creek Park Golf Course
Remarks of Brian Joyner, National Park Service, Rock Creek Park
National Capital Planning Commission – September 5, 2024

Good afternoon, Commissioners, NCPC staff, and community members,

I am Brian Joyner, acting Superintendent of Rock Creek Park. Thank you for your time today as we present the Rock Creek Park Golf Course Rehabilitation Project for final review.

When we met in May and received NCPC’s preliminary approval, you asked the National Park Service to re-engage with the public and to focus on concerns including tree removal, site lighting, and accountability for the lessee.

Since May, the National Park Service has hosted or participated in 18 public meetings about the project. These meetings have been crucial in ensuring that we remain transparent about the rehabilitation plan. They also provided us opportunities to share accurate information and hear and respond to people’s concerns and questions. Since signing the long-term golf course lease, National Links Trust has hosted numerous events and participated in public forums to talk about this project and hear community feedback.

We have heard from many people who appreciated the National Park Service’s and National Links Trust’s efforts to discuss, listen, and make changes to the plan where feasible. It is our hope that, through this dialogue, we have demonstrated our commitment to preserving the park’s natural environment now and in the future, protecting this historic asset, and broadening the park’s recreational resources so that all people – neighbors and visitors alike – can play golf, walk, birdwatch, relax, and enjoy the park.

There are many people who would like to speak today, so my remarks will focus on a few important things:

First, National Links Trust (NLT) signed a 50-year lease with the National Park Service (NPS) to operate, rehabilitate, and maintain three historic public golf courses in Washington, DC: East Potomac, Langston, and Rock Creek. The lease creates a structure that allows National Links Trust to generate revenue to sustain the courses and is rooted in a shared commitment to preserve our nation’s cultural and natural heritage.

The lease requires National Links Trust to make improvements consistent with National Park Service management documents including a Cultural Landscape Report. This report describes treatment guidelines and management direction for maintenance and modifications to the course while preserving its historic character. Developing this project has been an 8-year-long, intentional process to consider and meet historic preservation and environmental compliance requirements, including continual consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The project has been reviewed and approved by the Commission of Fine Arts and the D.C. Historic Preservation Office.

The lease acts as a contract to ensure that the ambitious goals of this project – including the extensive meadows, tree plantings, and maintenance – are met and maintained. These improvements will restore a landscape listed in the National Register of Historic Places, make golf accessible to a broader audience, and provide services and spaces that benefit park visitors and resources. The lease ensures that under National Links Trust’s care, the golf course is maintained consistent with its requirements, and the NPS will enforce its terms.

Second, since receiving preliminary approval, we have reduced the number of trees to be removed and adjusted the phasing of the tree work. Remember, we are removing trees for four reasons: safety, non-native species, turf health, and to accommodate the more compact design of this proposed rehabilitation.

As the project progresses, we will continually evaluate and adjust to remove the fewest trees possible. Today, the plan calls for planting 7.1 acres of trees and removing a maximum of 5.8 acres of tree canopy. We will plant 3 native trees for every healthy, native tree that is removed. As an example, we have removed the irrigation pond in favor of capturing rainwater in a large cistern. This keeps 77 trees that were previously slated for removal.

As part of our adaptive approach, the NPS will first remove invasive plants and trees in multiple phases. We will monitor turf and tree health for improvement after each phase. The planting plan calls for areas of larger trees spaced farther apart to contribute to the open, parkland character of the golf course and forested areas where smaller trees will be planted more densely, but with enough room to thrive and grow.

We have heard concerns that tree replacement will not occur and if trees die that they will not be replaced. As I mentioned, the entire plan is a requirement of the lease and maintaining the golf course at the level of the plan is a lease requirement to which National Links Trust is legally and contractually bound.

In addition to the tree replacement, this project will add more than 12 acres [12.3 acres] of new meadow. We are able to achieve this by reducing the size of the golf course. Like trees, meadows are vital to healthy and productive ecosystems. Meadows have deep-rooted grasses that enhance nutrient cycling, carbon sequestration, and promote healthy soil. Meadows improve water infiltration and reduce runoff and soil erosion, which is particularly beneficial to Rock Creek and Rock Creek Park’s ecosystem. Incorporating meadows into the golf course landscape improves the growing conditions for turf on fairways and greens and provides important habitat for a wide range of plant and animal species – including the monarch butterfly.

Third, the NPS has continued to refine the lighting plan to be protective of the night sky and wildlife. The NPS recognizes that the lighting proposed by this project is a concern because the course currently has minimal lighting around the club house, the maintenance yard, and the parking lot. Through this project, the NPS will install exterior lighting for the clubhouse, parking lot, driving range, pavilion structures, and putting green. This will be accomplished in a way that meets NPS Natural Sounds and Night Sky, guidelines which state that light should be used only where it is needed, at the minimum level necessary, with shielded fixtures, and warm-colored light.

Lights will be turned off between civilian twilight and astronomical twilight and will be a warm color that complements the natural color of late-day light to replicate natural biotic rhythms. Simply put, the lights will turn off before true night begins to mitigate the effects of lighting. In addition, we have recently become aware of ball-tracing camera technology that requires 70% less light to track a ball at the driving range and will further adjust the design to reflect this.

Throughout project planning, some have made inaccurate and disparaging remarks about National Links Trust. The comments suggest that NLT is profiting from public lands at the expense of the environment or that NLT is promoting this project to ensure that the elite have access to premier experiences while excluding access to others. Contrary to what you may hear, NLT is not profiting from this project. As a nonprofit organization NLT invests revenue back into the courses to promote affordable, accessible golf, preserve historic golf course architecture, and engage with communities through educational programs. Fees for the rehabilitated course will remain well below market rate to ensure the course remains affordable.

While there has been vocal opposition, it is important to note that there is also quieter, substantial support for the project. To date, more than 5,500 people have signed a petition to support the project, and approximately 4,000 of them live in DC and nearby communities. The petition has been submitted for the record. We believe this level of support reflects a shared vision for the future of Rock Creek Park – one that balances recreational opportunities with environmental stewardship and historic preservation.

We have consulted and coordinated with dozens of experts and professionals from a variety of fields – golf course operators, architects, and builders; agronomists, irrigation designers, Professional Golf Association (PGA) Teaching Professionals, golf course environmental management professionals, ecologists, biologists, historical architects, accessibility experts, historians, arborists, historical landscape architects, fire and safety experts, engineers, and hydrologists. In addition, we have learned from other successful projects and industry leaders.

Over the last decade, municipal golf has seen successful renovation projects at different scales across the country. National Links Trust has observed what was successful and well-received elsewhere and used it to inform the design process. For the past three years, NLT has convened experts in municipal golf for an annual symposium in Washington, D.C., to discuss affordable and accessible golf, operations, rehabilitation projects, environmental stewardship, and architecture.

A variety of community viewpoints have informed this project and are vital to its success. We remain committed to ongoing dialogue and information-sharing.

The benefits of the rehabilitation project at Rock Creek Park extend beyond the golf course. They include creating a vibrant, well-maintained, and environmentally sound green space that serves golfers and non-golfers alike; offering access to nature and the park; strengthening community through place-based programs; and ensuring that Rock Creek Park's mandate to conserve nature and history is honored today and for future generations.

Thank you for your consideration of this project, and I look forward to answering your questions.