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Rye Golf's Business Model in the Rough

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By Robin Jovanovich

At the February 15 City Council meeting, the Rye Golf Club Commission presented its annual pre-season update. Scott Yandrasevich, the longtime general manager of the club, provided a comprehensive overview.

He opened with, "The current business model may not be sustainable," which while not news to the Council, drew a few deep breaths from a number of residents in City Hall that night.

Mr. Yandrasevich noted that they've seen a drop in membership since the recession began in 2008. Last year, membership at Rye Golf dropped to 1,505, a decrease of over 10% in three years.

With health care benefits rising for the club's current and retired employees, the Commission's short-term financial solution was to use fund balance—over \$700,000 of it—to pay for operations the last few years and keep dues low.

"Current and former Councilmembers have questioned this decision," said Mr. Yandrasevich. "While we serve the town, we're solely funded by membership. We're a member club that is publicly owned. We work with a number of user groups — the Rye High School golf and swim teams use our facilities and we do programs with Rye Nature Center."

There seems to be a disparity between how the City Council views Rye Golf, and how the Rye Golf Commission sees it.

Mayor Doug French remarked recently, "This and previous Councils continue to ask: 'What's the long-term vision of the club?' The model worked for a while, but we have real concerns about the club falling short of revenue. We're losing members to outside clubs, which are lowering their dues."

At the Council meeting, discussion focused for several minutes on the new \$300 annual dining minimum at Whitby Castle. Yandrasevich defended the decision: "The minimum helps the Castle as well as the club as a whole." He noted that a spending minimum has been under discussion since 2008.

Mayor French's response was, "When you change a policy like that it should have been red flagged to the Council." Councilwoman Catherine Parker said she'd heard from a number of residents who felt there should have been public discussion of this before it was decided.

"There was sufficient vetting," Yandrasevich said.

Longtime club and commission member Pat Geoghegan defused the disagreement when she explained that they'd done a member survey back in 2008 about a minimum and there had been little pushback. "We decided it was a way to encourage members to come up, have a drink and burger and enjoy the club."

Will the Golf Club be on a better course this year? Yandrasevich said they've already had a tremendous number of new inquiries.

Meanwhile, several longtime members voiced disapproval over current issues. Senior Jessie Harper said the "House" membership category needs rethinking. "We're only allowed to use the club for 15 days of the season and we can only go after 2 p.m."

Yandrasevich said it was a one-year trial, for which 26 people signed up. "We've revamped it for this year so it's pay as you go."

Frank Kenny, who has been a RGC member for 30 years, said a number of transparency issues need to be addressed. "The Council should take a hard look at costs and structure."

In his view, "The membership structure is fundamentally wrong. For my 23-year-old son to be a member costs \$4,000."

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In an interview with the paper after the Council meeting, Yandrasevich, who has managed the club since 2002, agreed the model needs tweaking at Rye Golf. "We've tried to do it in a small, tolerable way. The demand for facilities is much higher and we're consciously making improvements."

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