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Anchorage Disc Golf Site Selection and Management Study

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Prepared for: Anchorage Municipality

Parks & Recreation Department

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Contents

Anchorage Disc Golf Site Selection and Management Study

INTRODUCTION
Background2
Objective2
Process2
SITE SELECTION CRITERIA3
Size3
Conflicts3
Parking4
Levels of Play5
Course Character5
Restrooms5
Access5
Sizable Populations5
Existing Infrastructure5
Existing Master Plan5
MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES
1) Establish an organization of disc golf users
2) Potential use agreement8
SITE SELECTION EXERCISE
CONCLUSION11
RFFFRENCES

Anchorage Disc Golf Site Selection and Management Study

Introduction

Background

Disc golf is a growing sport in the Anchorage bowl, and has a well-established following by all ages of residents. This fun and affordable game is currently being played at multiple Anchorage courses (See Appendix B for course location map), including Russian Jack Springs, Service High School, Kincaid Park, Hilltop Ski Resort, Hanshew Middle School, and Westchester Lagoon. These courses range in both skill level and size, but the most frequented course has typically been Westchester Disc Golf Course.

The lack of existing management guidelines and siting criteria were contributing factors in Parks & Recreation's decision to close the popular Westchester Disc Golf course for the summer of 2012 to rehabilitate areas damaged from heavy course use. The topic was discussed at the May 10th, 2012 Parks & Recreation Commission meeting where concerns regarding disc golf activity and how it conflicts with other park uses, were brought up by neighbors of Westchester Lagoon and the disc golf community (see Appendix A for staff report). It was decided that Westchester will operate primarily as a winter-only course going forward, with availability for permitted events at Parks & Recreation's discretion.

The seasonal closure prompted a public forum by the disc golf community that demonstrated an interest in additional courses throughout Anchorage to accommodate the demand for this popular recreational activity. Sparked by a strong community response, Parks & Recreation decided to establish an advisory group to develop site criteria and management strategies to find suitable locations for additional disc golf courses.

Objective

Comprised of members of the Parks & Recreation Commission, the Parks & Recreation Department, neighbors of Westchester Lagoon, and local disc golf players, the newly formed advisory group was tasked with 1) recommending site criteria to better locate disc golf courses, and 2) providing input on potential management strategies to minimize conflicts with disc golf and other park uses and ensure a prosperous, successful, and sustainable future for disc golf. Parks & Recreation contracted with USKH to facilitate the advisory group meetings and to develop the documentation necessary to reach the group's goals.

The final body of discussion, input, and comments, from the advisory group meetings were combined into the following Disc Golf Site Selection and Management Study.

Process

To collect the needed input from the advisory group members, a series of five meetings were held at the USKH offices on:

- 1) August 21, 2012 Introduction of group members, review of objectives, scheduling
- 2) September 4, 2012 Discussion of Site Criteria
- 3) September 19, 2012 Discussion of Management Strategies
- 4) October 10, 2012 Site criteria exercises
- 5) December 4, 2012 Final Review of Baseline Document and Next Steps

Notes from each meeting and supplementary information can be accessed at the project's website: http://www.muni.org/Departments/parks/Pages/ProjectDocuments.aspx.

Site Selection Criteria

The following criteria were identified to aid in the selection of a preferred site or sites for disc golf in the Anchorage Bowl. Course size, location, and number of holes will be contingent upon the criteria as applied to Municipal park land. Following are the key criteria for identifying a suitable site.

Size

National standards for disc golf indicate that a good rule of thumb for space requirements is one acre per hole¹. The advisory group noted that this should be viewed as a guideline and not as a hard rule. The advisory group has suggested that a mix of disc golf opportunities including neighborhood 3-hole practice courses, 9-hole courses, and an 18-hole course would relieve pressure from a single 9 or 18 hole course. Neighborhood 3-hole courses have the greatest flexibility and can be accommodated in smaller areas because they are intended primarily for practice, for all skill levels and ages, and are not established to support regulation play. By contrast a 9-hole or 18-hole course would benefit from greater than 1-acre per hole to allow for some rotation of holes on the course.

Space requirements for courses also vary depending on the terrain and level of difficulty. An 18-hole course with varying topography and tree cover may be minimally accommodated in 15 acres, where an 18-hole course that is open and flat may require 20 acres or more to be challenging, even for simple recreational play.

Conflicts

Disc golf courses may conflict with concurrent park uses. Specific conflicts identified by the advisory group include:

- Neighboring residences: It is recognized that the presence and usage of a course in a neighborhood has been documented to be disturbing to adjacent neighbors, which has and could result in hostility between the community and course users. This conflict runs the risk of resulting in a course closure, and could negatively affect the sustainability of the sport in the given area. Without support for a course, the course may not be viable. Buffering and/or spatial separation between the course and adjacent neighbors is considered highly important. The distance recommended by a national source is 50 100 feet from edges of play to existing uses.
- Trails: The advisory group identified conflicts with trail users as equally significant to conflicts with adjacent neighbors. While proximity to the Anchorage trail system is desirable in order to provide access to the course, conflicts may occur when the holes on the course are too close to the existing trail system, whereby users are required to use the shared trail paths. The conflict is on high use trails where cyclist and runners may encounter slower groups of walking users. Congested trails with users traveling at different speeds can lead to accidents, injuries, and overall resentfulness between the trail users and the course users. This conflict can also occur when disc course users are required to cross trails in order to complete the game, or when players are forced to queue at trail locations to begin or continue play.
- Vehicular circulation: Experience, at both Westchester lagoon and in other communities, has demonstrated that conflicts between vehicles and disc golfers should be avoided. Considerations for course location should include ensuring stray discs are

unlikely to be thrown into streets, and to avoid players crossing a public roadway. Also included in this category are parking lots. As with roads and trails, parking lots should have an adequate buffer of distance and vegetation from a disc golf course for the same issues of stray discs and safe vehicular circulation.

- Other park uses: Other park uses conflict with disc golf in varying degrees. For the
 purpose of this study, other designated park uses such as playgrounds, ball fields, dog
 parks, etc., should be considered as conflicting uses, and should not overlap with disc
 golf courses. While multiple uses are encouraged in Municipal parkland, input from the
 advisory group established a need for distance, separation, setbacks, and/or sufficient
 space for each designated use to minimize conflicts.
- Illegal Activities: The advisory group noted that illegal activities are a problem and cause conflicts with adjacent neighbors and other park users. These activities include drug and alcohol use, vandalism, late (after-hours) use, and other inappropriate actions. While these activities may be mitigated through site selection and course design, a separate discussion of management strategies is provided that is better equipped to address this issue.
- **Environmental Degradation:** It has been noted that disc golf courses have the potential for environmental degradation due to heavy course use. Vegetation can be severely impacted by consistently heavy foot traffic. It is also noted by the advisory board that additional holes per course can help with rotation of use, and act as a mechanism to relieve pressure to environmental damage. Additionally, areas that are known to be environmentally sensitive, such as special habitat areas including nesting areas and wetland areas, require careful buffering and protection.
- Costs to Park Maintenance: The conflicts sited above may increase requirements for Park Maintenance staff and Park administrators. Poorly managed and sited courses will likely result in more cost to the Department in the form of staff time or increased maintenance costs.

The advisory group did not identify hard and fast buffering requirements to meet these needs. As previously noted, guidelines for disc golf courses call for 50'-100' feet of separation from conflicting uses, preferably using a buffer of trees and bushes as opposed to open space buffers. The advisory group felt that distance should certainly be required for separation from residences, trails, and roadways, but might be viewed more as a guideline for some other park uses. It was also noted that for 3-hole practice areas in neighborhood parks this could probably be flexible based on neighborhood input and review of the specific circumstances of the location.

A site criterion that could better mitigate conflicts with disc courses would involve using greater acreage than the standard 1-acre per hole. Increased acreage for uses would lessen competition of space within a park and would reduce conflicts, as disc golf is a single use activity that requires a separate space. Ultimately, careful site selection and course design is required to mitigate the conflicts listed above.

Parking:

Parking is an important consideration for courses that are 9-holes or greater. For courses of that size, people will drive from other parts of Anchorage to use the course. Failure to address parking will result in spill-over into adjacent neighborhoods, parking on grassed areas, ultimately causing damage to park assets. Other locations, including a study for Boulder, Colorado, have identified the need for 3-5 spaces of parking for each hole, but may vary considerably based on course popularity and accessibility. This

should be considered in addition to any other park uses that require parking. For larger courses, parking should be considered a requirement.

Level of Play:

Although level of play does not specifically affect site selection criteria, it does indirectly. There is consensus among the advisory group that any new course should focus on the needs of recreational players (versus competitive players). The impact of this is that a recreational course does not have to strictly comply with the requirements of a competitive course for hole lengths and orientation and thereby has greater flexibility to adapt to various sites. The purpose of orienting a new course to the recreational player is to engage more people with this recreational opportunity. Engaging more recreational and inexperienced players places a premium on site selection in order to reduce any conflicts course users might have with other park users.

Course Character:

Like other park users, disc golfers are attracted to settings with good views, a mix of open and wooded areas, and a mix of nearby activities. This is especially true for casual and recreational players. The advisory group noted that courses with a mix of open areas and wooded areas offer the right level of challenge for recreational players. The advisory group noted that courses in parks nearby nodes of other activities and services may appeal to users with limited time for recreation.

Restrooms:

For courses of 9 holes or more, restrooms should be mandatory. These can be portable toilets placed as needed.

Access:

The location of disc golf courses should preference access by as many transportation modes available including roadways, bicycle/pedestrian trails and walkways, and public transit. As noted under the "Conflicts" heading, care should be taken to avoid conflicts between the course itself and these various modes of transportation.

Where possible, disc golf courses should be located to afford pedestrian access from surrounding residential neighborhoods and serve areas with sizable populations. Some members of the advisory group noted that the Westchester course serves a sizable residential area in close proximity making it pedestrian accessible. One suggestion was to identify potential parks that are large enough to host a disc golf course within a mile or so from existing high schools or middle schools.

Existing Infrastructure:

The advisory board noted that identifying locations with existing infrastructure, such as restrooms and parking lots, that could support disc golf, would be optimal. This acknowledges that there will be costs associated with development of a new course and that the most likely means of advancing a course toward completion will be to minimize development costs. As an example, development of a new parking lot for 45 or 50 vehicles could cost \$500,000. Identifying a location with an existing parking lot serving that many vehicles may reduce development costs.

Existing Master Plan:

The advisory group noted the importance of reviewing the relevant master plans of parks where potential courses are considered, and engage the public, including community councils, with any future disc golf course plans. This process is compulsory for the Parks & Recreation Department, but should be

considered forethought, as the existence of a master plan on a preferred parcel of park land can help with promoting the installation of a disc golf course, or it may deter such use if previously deemed inappropriate. The Park Plan does not identify level of service standards for the number of disc golf courses to serve Anchorage's population. Although this baseline document does not represent a needs assessment for disc golf courses in Municipal parkland, the advisory group supports the Department's discretion and careful analysis to determine the feasibility of additional disc golf courses in our parks.

Management Strategies

Disc golf provides opportunity for Anchorage residents of all ages to get outdoors and participate in an activity that encourages social interaction and physical exercise. Support of this activity on park lands is well within the scope and mission of Parks & Recreation, if courses are properly sited and managed. As with many sports or activities that occur on park lands, the practice of playing disc golf on an established course within a municipal park can and does result in conflicts with other park users, conflicts with adjacent neighborhoods, public safety concerns, and environmental damage to the course itself through heavy ongoing use. The selection of an appropriate site can reduce or eliminate many of the conflicts and other problems common to disc golf courses, however it is unlikely that it will be possible to identify a perfect site and eliminate all conflicts.

As a result, within the advisory group, there is general agreement that some of the issues and conflicts, previously identified, are best addressed through management of the disc golf course. This management effort may in part be accomplished through the Parks & Recreation department, but given limited resources, management of disc golf courses in our community might best be accomplished through an organization representing disc golfers and disc golf supporters. This approach has strong precedent in our community. Local soccer players, baseball players, and Nordic skiers all have established use agreements with the parks department allowing them to manage resources in support of their activity to a level higher than Parks & Recreation can provide due to staffing and budget constraints.

Generally, these groups are organized in such a way that they can enter into legally binding agreements with Parks & Recreation, as they can collect donations or solicit sponsorships, and they can accept some level of responsibility for the upkeep of the resource they are using and they can impose some conditions of use on their membership^{III}.

This advisory group has not set out to establish such an agreement within the context of this baseline document, but rather to provide input and guidance on what components might be addressed in a future use agreement. As described below, the advisory group discussed 1) issues related to the establishment of an organization that can represent disc golf users, and 2) issues which might be considered in such a use agreement.

1) Establish an organization that can represent disc golf users in Anchorage:

This desire was expressed by the advisory group as being an important goal, but may prove to be challenging. As disc golf is a sport that tends to have a high turnover rate, due to a predominantly younger and transient population, collecting enough long lasting members may be difficult to form a strong organization.

That said, there was agreement that it would be very helpful if such an organization existed for the purposes of representing the interests of disc golfers, ultimately providing organization for clean-ups, course monitoring, and policing of the disc golf use. Of specific concern is the ability to form a well-organized non-profit to fill this need. It would be very desirable if this organization could be set up as a non-profit entity under IRS Code Section 501(c)(3) so that it could accept tax-deductible contributions. However, it is not easy to either set up or maintain such an entity. An initial organizational strategy might be to form a disc golf organization under the umbrella of another non-profit organization, or as a project under an existing non-profit^{III}. This umbrella non-profit would provide a means of taking

monetary donations that will be needed to fulfill the requirements of a future use agreement, but could also be used for general improvements and other organizational needs.

Additionally, a disc golf organization could assist with the recruitment and management of volunteers for clean-ups, course rotation (relocation of baskets to allow natural course recovery) and other activities that would help to fulfill the requirements of the use agreement. A remaining concern is that Parks & Recreation may not be able to enter into a binding use agreement with an organization that does not have some legal status. The need to establish a disc golf organization will remain an ongoing effort.

2) A use agreement will likely contain a number of clauses that anticipate potential impacts of providing park space for disc golf:

Such a use agreement would be similar to the agreements already in place for soccer and baseball in Municipal parks, although the agreement would need to recognize that because disc golf is not a team sport, the ability of the association to control the conduct of the group it represents is limited. It would also address key concerns and spell out responsibilities of disc golf players (through a disc golf organization) and the Municipality's share of maintenance and upkeep for the course. The agreement would offer a means of resolving disputes and establish the repercussions (to include possible closure) if the requirements of the agreement are not met. Following are examples of clauses that have been included in existing agreements between user groups and the Municipality that might be considered for the management of Anchorage disc golf courses.

- Clean-up and trash pick-up: The disc golf organization (Permittee) shall ensure that those areas affected by the Permittee's activities are maintained in a condition that is free of trash and other deleterious materials. For trash pick-up, the association might pay to have trash removed on a more frequent basis than what Parks & Recreation would consider routine to avoid overflowing bins, but the organization could also consider a policy that requires any trash carried in, to be carried out.
- Maintenance of toilets: This example clause could require the Permittee to maintain an agreed number of portable toilets, suitably located to service disc golf course users, and appropriate in number to the course use.
- Level of use, vandalism, and graffiti: The use agreement could focus on the actual condition of the course and might be addressed by language such as: The Permittee shall monitor the area for vandalism, graffiti, and course wear due to level of use. If such damage does occur, either within the area of the disc golf course or on private property adjacent to the course, the Permittee shall be responsible for repair, or replacement of property or remediation/relocation in the event of excessive wear on the course. This responsibility might be better handled if the disc golf organization and Parks & Recreation could meet to discuss use issues, and also to determine the appropriate repair work. It was also suggested by the advisory group to recruit volunteer support to monitor course use on a regular basis to determine a rough number of rounds-perday. The intent of course monitoring is to establish a baseline of current usage and to help identify at what level of use should remedial actions, such as the rotation of baskets or temporary relocation of the course, be implemented.
- Removal of trees or shrubs: The Permittee shall not remove any trees or shrubs for the
 purpose of improving or modifying the course without written permission from the Parks &
 Recreation Department.

- *Illegal activity:* Disc golf courses are subject to all Municipal laws as they pertain to parklands. The Permittee shall post course rules at the beginning of the course, perhaps on a sign-board provided by Parks & Recreation. A disc golf organization can be pivotal in conveying responsibilities of course use to organization members and the public.
- Notification and dispute resolution: A disc golf organization shall serve as the point of contact for any notifications from Parks & Recreation. Parks & Recreation may revoke this permit at any time if deemed in the best interest of the Department, or the community. Prior to any closure, Parks & Recreation will notify the disc golf organization of its intent and seek to remedy any cause for closure. Although other use agreements do not appear to include such a clause, the advisory group strongly suggested that incorporating some means of dispute resolution would be beneficial to ensure sustainable use of the park and to provide specific steps and protocols prior to any closure if the requirements of the agreement are not met.
- **Parks department responsibilities:** Establish that in a public park, Parks & Recreation is responsible for a pre-determined level of support, including, but not limited to, maintenance, mowing, some level of trash removal, and signage.
- **Insurance:** The user group retaining general liability insurance is a common clause in use agreements, and is often necessary for permitted use of park facilities. This element serves as a way to formalize accountability between the Parks & Recreation Department and a disc golf organization.
- **Special Events:** A special events clause can better illustrate the frequency of tournaments within a park, any provisional work or preparation deemed necessary, and procuring the required permits, or appropriate protocol (additional toilets, safety signage, etc.), to better facilitate events. Special Use permits are provided by Parks & Recreation which define the responsibilities of the Permittee and Parks & Recreation.

A number of other items were discussed as a means of managing and funding disc golf courses in our community. These included organization of volunteers for clean-up and maintenance of a disc golf course, seeking out of commercial sponsors for the course, collection of fees or donations for course use and other means of improving course quality and reducing conflicts. Most of these ideas, however, would not be incorporated into a use agreement, but rather offer the means for a disc golf organization to comply with the clauses incorporated into a use agreement.

The advisory group has indicated a strong opinion that if a single course is identified that garners the same popularity as the Westchester location, many of the problems that occurred at Westchester Lagoon would simply occur again at some new location. While not reaching any specific conclusion, several members of the advisory group expressed a hope that offering more options, in the vicinity of Westchester, for playing disc golf in our community would diffuse the impact on any one location and reduce the problems that have been concentrated at Westchester lagoon. It was also expressed that any future disc golf courses could suffer the same problems identified at Westchester lagoon, and could bring these issues into additional neighborhoods.

Overall, it is not the objective of this group to identify the appropriate number of disc golf facilities to serve the demand for this activity, but to provide Parks & Recreation with recommendations to diffuse issues through careful site selection and the best possible management strategies available.

Site Analysis Exercise - A Review of Course Site Criteria

For the purposes of refining the site criteria, six municipal parks over 15 acres in size were reviewed and discussed with the advisory group. The exercise was intended to test the criteria generated by the advisory group in order to determine if any further changes or modifications were needed. The purpose of the exercise was not to pick the best sites for future disc golf courses. Listed below are the parks reviewed during the exercise:

- 1) Davis Park (Mountain View): This 90+ acre park has adequate space for a large course, and does have existing parking and a trail system. The group noted that the topography was relatively flat, the neighborhood was perceived as being unsafe, and extensive clearing and pruning of existing vegetation would be necessary to create a course. The park was also considered to be too distant to encourage former Westchester lagoon players.
- 2) Eastchester/Sitka Park (Chester Creek Greenbelt): Similar to the Westchester course, this location is on a popular trail system, providing convenient access from downtown and midtown. Drawbacks included the lack of existing parking, existing wetlands and potential environmental issues, the viewshed from adjacent neighborhoods, and the heavy use of the trail.
- 3) Charles W. Smith Park (Chester Creek Greenbelt): The group responded positively to Charles Smith Park due to its access and proximity to Westchester lagoon. There was also sentiment that neighbors and other stakeholders would respond positively to the change of use in the northern woods which chronically experiences a consistent population of homeless camps. It was expressed that disc golf users may displace such activity in a park. This park does have an adequate acreage for a small-to-medium-sized course, and has parking at the nearby Mulcahy Stadium & Sullivan Arena parking lots. It has an existing buffer of trees from the adjacent neighbors, and does have some amount of varying topography, alternating from wetlands to a steep bluff. The most significant issue for this site is the wet areas and the potential for environmental damage.
- 4) Earthquake Park (West Anchorage): This large park has sufficient size, and has the most challenging topography from all the parks discussed. It was noted by members of the advisory group, that such attributes, along with the park's strong natural beauty and adjacent viewshed of the Cook Inlet, could make it a professional-level destination course that could attract tourists. Site issues included the limited amount of parking, possible environmental issues with steep terrain, unstable soils, wetlands, heavy pedestrian use at the nearby Coastal Trail, and possible neighborhood resistance.
- 5) Centennial Park (Northeast Anchorage): This classic Anchorage park has adequate space, with a very natural, wooded, and undulating terrain. It has some parking, but overall, this park is a distant location from the downtown and midtown population, and has very limited access points. It was thought to be too remote, and to have insufficient infrastructure, which would increase development costs.
- 6) Russian Jack Springs Park (Northeast Anchorage): As Russian Jack Springs Park has an existing course in place, available parking, and adequate acreage, the group responded positively to an additional course in the southwest corner, in the vicinity of the abandoned campground location. The site enjoys a strong aesthetic quality with views of the mountains and the city,

along with diverse topography, naturally challenging all levels of users. There are existing trails that would help with access and site circulation. Noted drawbacks from the advisory group included potential community resistance to any tree removal in forested areas. Additional issues included sensitive habitat on site, and a possible use overlap with the biking and skiing trails.

Conclusion

This baseline document was created through the joint input of the Municipality of Anchorage, neighborhood residents, and local disc golfers. Disc golf remains a popular recreational activity to enjoy in our parks, and in order for it to be sustainable in the community, future courses must undergo extensive siting analysis based on objective criteria in order to avoid conflicts with concurrent and equally popular park uses. A management agreement(s) with an organized user group is needed to ensure the management costs of disc golf are shared by the user community. It is the hope that the site selection criteria and management recommendations from this document will assist Parks & Recreation with evaluating potential disc golf course locations in order to foster a positive pattern of play in the community.

References:

- I. Disc Golf Association. PDFA Disc Golf Course Design Standards "Acreage Chart". 2012. www.pdga.com/files/documents/AcreageChart.pdf. Web. October 2012.
- II. 2006 Parks and Recreation Master Plan Appendix L1. "Disc Golf Study." Boulder, Colorado. Prepared September 2005 and updated October 2006.
- III. City of Homer. "Land Use Agreement and Permit". Jack Gist Recreational Park Association. June, 2012

Appendix A: Staff Report to Parks & Recreation Commission on May 10, 2012 regarding Westchester Disc Golf Course

Since 2008, the Alaska Disc Golf Association (ADGA) and Anchorage Parks & Recreation have been actively working to improve the safety conditions and user conflicts at the Westchester Lagoon disc golf course. The completed improvements included realignment of the course, signage, new baskets, retention wall, steps, topsoil and seed. Although these improvements have somewhat improved course conditions and park and trail safety, the increased popularity of the course has compounded the problems. The Parks & Recreation Department continues to receive many complaints about the poor condition of the park near the disc golf course, trail conflicts and the deteriorating community park atmosphere.

In response to the growing conflict, the Department composed a Community Advisory Group (CAG) to propose solutions to resolve conflict and improve park conditions. This advisory group included two parks and recreation commission members, two Alaska Disc Golf Association Members and was led by Parks & Recreation Staff.

As a result of the public process, the Parks and Recreation Department has closed the disc golf course at Westchester Lagoon for the summer of 2012 to repair areas that are damaged from heavy course use. The course will be rehabilitated with topsoil and grass seed and damaged trees and shrubs will be replaced with new plantings. The course will re-open this fall for winter use and it will available for permitted events the following summers.

All repaired areas will be enclosed with temporary fencing to eliminate disturbance of the newly seeded areas. Protective enclosures will be installed over the basket mounts to facilitate future seasonal and permitted use of the course.

The public forum hosted by the disc golf community on May 2nd demonstrated an interest in additional courses throughout Anchorage to facilitate the growing sport. University Lake, Davis Park, Russian Jack Springs Park, Centennial Park, Arnold L. Muldoon Park and parks in the Government Hill area were the ideas presented by the group. Parks and Recreation recognizes the need for additional courses within Anchorage and will assist with the development of disc golf courses through proper planning, community support and fundraising.

The disc golf community also provided the following suggestions to allow the Westchester disc golf course to remain open during the summer months:

- Pin system players purchase pins to financially support ADGA (similar to the NSAA pin system)
- Trash can at every hole
- Law and rule enforcement
- Volunteer trash pick-up (2) times per month (Collaborative Minds volunteered this effort)
- Add another (9) holes at Westchester to dissipate the impact
- Add (3-4) more courses in Anchorage
- Have 2-3 baskets in other neighborhood parks

The forum also generated the following statements regarding the closure of the Westchester disc golf course:

- The course is great in winter The course should be (4) season
- The course should remain free
- The course is the best amateur course
- The course makes the neighborhood safer

ADGA will be nominating (3-4) individuals to represent the interest of the Anchorage Disc Golf Community as one voice. This group will work on a path forward including proposed courses and solutions to problems in existing courses.

Appendix B: Current Courses in Anchorage

