

Belmont Community Input Meeting
May 6, 2019
Question and Answer Discussion Summary

Introductions:

Mr. Thornton opened the meeting and welcomed everyone. People who have some of the best minds and ideas about what to do about a piece of jewelry, artwork, gem. Mr. Thornton drew attention to two things significant to him: you took the time to come, and people (County employees, Belmont employees) are here to listen. If other localities could follow this model it would benefit all governments. Thank you for being here and for signing up to speak, we welcome that. We want to make sure that you leave here feeling heard.

Mr. Schmitt echoed Mr. Thornton's praise of the process. Other jurisdictions might have moved on a budget line item without community input, but not here. In previous meetings, Mr. Schmitt said he heard about youth initiatives, an advisory council, stories of emotion and history, suggestions for the utilization of different areas of land. Thank you for giving up a Monday evening. He thanked the Board members and County staff for attending.

Mr. Vithoukas explained that he had not attended the last meeting as he was visiting another locality. He had sent Deputy County Manager Tim Foster to represent his office. Mr. Vithoukas wanted to be sure to make two points: in the first meeting, we met rumors about Belmont becoming a commercial development. This was never considered, and he wanted to continue to reiterate that. Second, Mr. Vithoukas stated that the Board has adopted the proposed budget for next fiscal year, and they did not make one adjustment to Belmont. The budget assumes that Belmont will continue to operate as usual for the next 12 months. Mr. Vithoukas recognized PRAC members in attendance: Chris Phelps, Chris Woody, Patrice Banks, and Ann Sterling. Herb Dunford who has served on Soil and Water Conservation, Sarah Pace is a previous member of HPAC. All comments from previous meetings are found on website. Truly all of them. He asked that we not repeat ourselves with speakers.

Public Comment:

Peter Grainger did a tally of Recreation & Parks facilities, which amount to between 45-47. Some are historic museums; some are play areas. Most have sporting facilities. 9 tennis courts, 14 baseball softball, 8 basketball, 13 soccer, 13 football, 8 fishing, 2-disc golf, 14 trails, 1 cricket pitch. The County Manager announced the cricket pitch as a reflection of the diversity of the County. Mr. Grainger doubts that anyone knows the cost of maintaining these parks and no one complains, and he believes no one should. He believes they are a reflection of a vibrant and successful County. Belmont is always talked about as a financial loss. Mr. Grainger thinks that is due to neglect and poor management. The cost Belmont requires amounts to ¼ of 1 gallon of gas per year in taxes per citizen.

John Howarth thanked the County Manager for attending. Belmont as a park is very close to Bryan Park, so why have two so close together? He echoed the management complaints. Suggested greater investment and marketing for Belmont, outsourcing if necessary. Market to young people. Add craft beers. Change alcohol policy. Get grants for youth programs. There are lots of retirement communities in

the area, with a new one being built nearby. That means more people to play the course if it's managed correctly.

Tim Nelligan said he appreciates the course as a senior, says it's a manageable length. He echoed the maintenance complaints but does not believe it is the fault of Belmont's staff. Praised golf course staff. Thinks we lose people because people don't fall in love with the course right away and must play it a few times to see it as a gem. He hopes we'll find a way to finance the fixing-up. Eliminating the golf course would eliminate any possible income, and it would become 100% expense. He does not think the golf course should be in the enterprise fund.

Shaun Irving said that to many people, Belmont is just a weekend course. Mr. Irving is the marketing director for Preserve Belmont. He says their website received messages from 1,000 golfers who have played Belmont and he shared some of their comments.

The first referenced the Tillinghast legacy, how he designed courses that have hosted 18 US Opens. They emphasized the importance in the community it serves.

The next said their family passes many courses on the way to Myrtle Beach from Canada, and they stop specifically at Belmont, walking the same course as Sam Snead.

The next was from New York, who wrote that they travel to Belmont with 8 friends each year.

The next was from Indianapolis. They believe Belmont could serve as source of economic development based on sports.

The last emphasized Belmont's convenience, consistency, and great layout. Tiger Woods has returned to grace, expect better fortunes to return to Belmont.

Blake Freeman's comments center on business operations, not necessarily the people working there or the County. If the County maintains Belmont as an Enterprise Fund, then it should be run as a business. To keep Belmont competitive, it must be competitive with other golf courses. He does not believe enough action was taken to repair the course. Will the golf course be allowed to make substantive changes, such as offerings to public, sending out email notices, developing more competitive website, or repair to the bunkers while the Board works on its decision? What is the process after these meetings end, and will it be public?

Mr. Vithoukaskas said that we are at the end of the public input process, his intent is to take all comments to the Board of Supervisors who will schedule a work session, which is a public meeting. Everything will be public. Immediate or intermediate steps to improve Belmont can absolutely happen. Mr. Vithoukaskas has been pleased with the common themes that have come forward. He thanked the attendees for their time and energy. This is democracy, we work for you. The County is not looking to do anything other than the will of the people. If anyone wants to blame someone about the concern over Belmont's financial issues, Mr. Vithoukaskas said to blame him. He brought it forward at the Board of Supervisors' retreat in January and said that we cannot operate the golf course as an enterprise and have these losses going forward. It will take a couple of months to come up with a policy that they would bring back to the Board. The County can send out a general email with the work session date. Mr. Vithoukaskas thinks that, generally, if this goes the way he thinks it will everyone will be pleased

Tom Casey has played at Belmont two times. He was amazed at its deteriorating condition. Fairfax County has six public County courses. He suggested offering a 3-par course 18-hole layout, lessons, driving range, fees for different times of days, season passes. These are all revenue sources. Belmont has no driving range, no attractions for bringing in high school teams. He suggested to promote and maintain the course in order to generate revenue. "You've got people who wanna play here but your traps suck."

Everett Chesley spoke about the enterprise fund and how it was established by the Board of Supervisors in 1984. County documents refer to the enterprise funds as "a section accounts for operations that are funded and operated in a manner like a private business enterprise. The intent of the accounting is to recover the cost of providing services." Mr. Chesley referenced a Richmond Times Dispatch article from April 15th that said that the collective positive reserves were 2.8 million in 2002. In the RTD article, Mr. Luther said that the course has not been profitable for several years. Since 2000 "the County has had to pay nearly \$3 million to subsidize the course." If we start the enterprise reserve balance at the end of 2000, there is \$2.4 million in it and it has drawn down to the level in the County Finance Report, there has been a net reduction of \$3 million as Mr. Luther said. The initial \$2.4 million reserve came from excess fees and profits paid to Belmont Golf Course by Belmont Golfers. It did not come from tax payers. It would be reasonable to imagine a Belmont Golfers Association Board of Directors, just like a business. If that was the case, I would expect that the Belmont Golfers Association Board of Directors would recognize that golf might be cyclical, just like the economy. Then I would expect that the Belmont Golfers Association would establish a reserve account for the golf course, just like what was done by the County. Similarities stop there. The Belmont Golfers Association Board would have invested the surplus reserve cash in an interest earning account. The interest would have been added to the Belmont Golfers Association reserve fund. The Enterprise fund peaked in 2002 at \$2.8 million but it has now gone negative. The interest earning Belmont Golfers Association reserve account would have also peaked in 2002 and by including interests it would be at approximately \$4 million. If it had earned interest on the excess balance that was paid into Belmont by golfers, plus interest, the golfers balance today would be about 2.5 million. So, what are we asking? Give us back some of our \$2.5 million balance that golfers have paid into the Belmont enterprise fund. Renovate sand traps, improve greens, improve fairways, take steps necessary to make Belmont golf course the pride of the Lakeside Community and Henrico County. Renovate sand traps, improve greens. With no renovations, Belmont will continue to decline over the next year. Should be a point of pride for the County.

Mr. Vithoukas said part of his concern is if you go back 11 years to 2008, we had a loss of 4.6 million and in that same time period the General Fund has added 782,000 into some smaller improvements for the course.

Hilton Withers is the coordinator for Henrico Seniors Golf, which has 84 members ranging in age from 62-94. They play every other week at Belmont. He learned to play golf in the 70s, when a friend told him: "The golf course is where you meet a lot of lifelong friends, where thousands of business deals are made." He has been playing at Belmont since then with different friend groups. The traps have gotten unplayable. He looked at budget, could not find income credited to Belmont, but the County Manager showed it to him. The budget shows the golf course budget and the projected earnings for the coming year, which amounts to a shortage of \$3,848. All parks and rec facilities combined equal tied up 4,000 acres. With an estimated tax value of \$2,000 per acre, that amounts to \$8 million not being taxed. Belmont's operating cost: \$20 million. Take Belmont, put it in the general fund, treat it like any other parks and rec facility.

Matthew Davenport is proud to have Belmont as his home course. The lack of public golf in Richmond is obvious; it has been voted worst public golf for mid-sized city. Despite its maintenance issues, he praised the course for the fact that the greens are always smooth and puttable. Solutions: youth golf, finding associations Belmont could partner with, 3-hole track, get PGA to subsidize rates for kids. The lack of a driving range is a problem. Golf simulators have gotten cheaper, which could help draw youth, and Belmont could get a corporate sponsor to subsidize the cost of the simulators. Mr. Davenport said he wouldn't mind paying \$5 more to help the course. He didn't know every 10th round on the course is free. Argued that Belmont needs more advertising budget allocated.

Kendall Ryan "At the risk of getting stoned," she said she wanted to share another perspective. She said she is not anti-golf, but pro-recreation and for as many people as possible. She spends a lot of time on trails for walking, running, and biking. Referenced high traffic at Deep Run. Cyclist teams are growing. She would like more parks in Henrico and not have to go to other counties. The Lakeside area is attracting more young families. She is on the Board of a local organization responsible for advocating for trails, which has members of all ages. She is also an ambassador for a national organization and leads mountain bike rides, where she regularly must cut off the sign-up list at 100. They can't go on those bike trips in Henrico because there aren't any mountain bike trails, they must go to other places. She wants recreation, safe places to walk/run/bike, and for Belmont's amenities to appeal to the most citizens as possible.

Mary Beth Henry said she is also not anti-golf and has no problem with Belmont as a golf course if it's manageable. She has lived here for 18- years and can count on one hand the number of times she's been to the Belmont rec center. She said there is not a wide range of activities at Belmont, and not a lot of bike trails in Henrico. There are not many places in Henrico to teach kids to bike. She wants to be able to share this beautiful area with citizens who have other recreational needs. She was excited for the new crosswalk at Lakeside and Hilliard, which provides even easier access to Belmont rec center. She suggested enhancing this amenity and having it appeal to broader spectrum of users.

Tom Meeks believes that the County had reasonable grounds to present these concerns to the community. He presented several suggestions. Enhance visibility of what the complex does. Cut down the bushes by the sign on the road and put flowers instead to attract more traffic, the bushes are covering up the part of the sign that says, "recreation center." He is a member of the Racketeers, senior tennis group that meets here. He praised the clay tennis courts, saying they compare favorably with other clay courses. He said that there is prompt servicing of the tennis courts when there's an issue. He asserted that Belmont is sacred ground for golfers. Lots of 1940s golf giants. He said that there are no signs telling that history in the clubhouse. Interest rates are going down, so we can't worry about making back the investment money that Everett Chesley mentioned, and suggested letting bygones be bygones. He suggested greater visibility of the green's fees online and on the website. Suggested a 9-hole course rate and membership rates.

Katie Houston lives on the golf course and wanted to reply to the two ladies who suggested having a greater variety of recreational opportunities at Belmont. Katie suggested having more concrete solutions for people who may not be interested in golf. People may be interested in a park but not sure what that would look like.

Hernan Bravo lives on Club Road. Mr. Bravo mentioned flooding from the creek and suggested that something needs to be done about that.

Mr. Vithoukaskas asked Mr. Foster to give Mr. Bravo the history of the creek flooding.

David Craven argued that you must spend money to make money. Example: Willow Lawn reinvented itself.

Woody Vaughn owns a home on the golf course and is currently a member of Jefferson Lakeside Country Club and saw other members in attendance. He said he was here on behalf of the Nashville Wings Trust and the Tillinghast Association, which is dedicated to preserving the life and writings and course design of Tillinghast, and to preserving the country's access to public golf. Quote from one of Tillinghast's books: "it has been my pleasure to design a number of southern courses, and without exception the features on this track are far more pleasing and interesting than any I've encountered south of the Mason-Dixon line."

He criticized Belmont's marketing, thinks there's a lack of it on social media and website presentations. Second, he said there was a lack of community activities, groups, leagues. Third, a failure of maintaining course commissions and facilities. If Belmont were restored, he believes it could be one of greatest golf destinations in Commonwealth. He asked County officials not to see its current offerings, but the opportunity of what it could be.

Ron Stilwell thanked staff, says it takes courage to get up there and listen, and that he appreciates their willingness to listen. He had his wedding at Belmont. He shared a proposed resolution for the Board of Supervisors. He wants something concrete to come out of all these meetings. His suggested the draft resolution to include the following, paraphrased: Preserve Belmont Golf course. It has made golf accessible to a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and is the home course for several high school teams. Mr. Stilwell emphasized its importance to the Lakeside Community, which has "evolved around the borders" of this course. Mr. Stilwell reiterated that it is the only course in VA to host a PGA Tournament. He also reiterated several different things he heard in previous meetings, such as the number of golfers Belmont serves, number of states represented, that it recovers 75-80% of operating expenses. He suggested preserving Belmont as an 18-hole golf course and he would like to know where we stand after this meeting so it is not left up in the air.

John Ball said this is the first meeting he has attended. He objected to the concept of Belmont having to be self-sufficient. Libraries, parks, and athletic fields don't make money. It maintains a high quality of life for residents.

Harry Davis is a part-time golfer, full time biker. Suggests that there are many other biking opportunities in Richmond. Does not agree with sacrificing historic golf course to biking.

Mr. Schmitt reiterated the County's commitment of listening, illustrated by the Board Members and County employees taking notes during the meeting. If you want it to be heard in this County/community, we'll stand here and listen. Mr. Schmitt said he heard some new things this evening: a focus on marketing and promotion, and said he respects the people who came to speak about recreation alternatives. This is not a zero-sum game; we do not have to have someone to lose for someone else to win. He wants to speak with bikers about bike trails. He asserted that that was a healthy conversation not of anti-golf but pro-amenities. He heard tonight about playability and maintenance, the uncertainty that other courses face which could create opportunity for the County. He heard the desire to fix the bunkers. He thanked the attendees for their time and energy, and especially wanted to underscore energy. We need it for this process to work. If Belmont is going to succeed, we don't just need the County staff, we're gonna need you, your passion, your energy, and you to advocate it. He asked the attendees to maintain their energy and excitement.

Mr. Thornton wanted to “ditto” Mr. Schmitt’s appreciation for the attendees coming out, on behalf of the entire Board of Supervisors. He used a metaphor: a bumblebee should not be able to fly, but no one ever told a bumblebee that. He said he wanted to tie in a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.: “there is something about the beloved community.” We have been listening. If you were here, you should not be concerned about false rumors, you should be concerned about polishing this gem. We have inclusion of your ideas. You’re going to have to help us with that, and you’ve already begun. This way we will end up with a better product.

Mr. Vithoukas thanked Neil Luther and staff for the work put into these meetings. Staff are going to take down all your comments, and from those we will bring proposal to the Board. There is a lot of good that came out of these three meetings. Sometimes if you see something that bothers you fiscally and don’t say anything, that becomes another kind of government. Mr. Vithoukas promised that the proposal to the Board will incorporate many comments. Anything the Board does in the Belmont work session will be open to the public with ample notification. There will be no waterpark coming to Belmont. Belmont continues as funded. Let us do our work and come back to the Board and you with a proposal that Mr. Vithoukas thinks you will be pleased with. Thank you for your time, emails, involvement. The County did not see nearly this involvement with County budget. Thank you for what you do on behalf of this County.