

August 27, 2003

Mayor Mark Begich  
Municipality of Anchorage, Alaska  
P.O. Box 196650  
Anchorage, Alaska 99519-6650

Re: Girdwood Golf Course

Dear Mayor Begich;

Thank you for finding time to meet with me and other supporters of the proposed Girdwood golf course committee. You represent a beautiful and friendly community that offers a unique lifestyle that is physically and spiritually close to Mother Nature. No one can possibly visit Anchorage for even a moment without being awed by the overwhelming majesty of the area - I know I was.

You asked me to write you a letter summarizing the points we discussed, as well as to include some tangible examples of projects similar to Girdwood's. My remarks will be based upon my 35 years of education, experience and training as a golf course architect, environmentalist, and parent (a full resume is available on my website at [www.hurdzanfry.com](http://www.hurdzanfry.com)). In addition, during my stay in Alaska, I spent a fair amount of time with people involved in the Anchorage golf industry, evaluated a couple of possible golf course sites in Girdwood, and visited several communities in the area to see the natural resources of the region as well as meet Alaskans. All of that taken together permits me to offer you these insights.

It would seem that the Girdwood microclimate would allow for a golf season only slightly abbreviated from that available in Anchorage. The Anchorage golf course hosts about 27,000 - 30,000 golfers in a good per year so it would seem reasonable that 23,000 - 25,000 rounds in Girdwood would be a normal peak. However unlike Anchorage, most of the Girdwood rounds would come from guests to the area as a destination experience or simply on impulse because golf is available in such a beautiful setting. In other words I believe that a golf course in Girdwood would be even more popular than the Anchorage golf course because it would receive national and international attention from travel and golf publications. In fact, given the incredible beauty of the Girdwood Valley I believe a properly designed golf course would be a candidate for "Top 100" status in America. The site is simply that good!

The very first thing that comes to almost every citizen's mind when discussing any kind of development in Alaska is environmental impact, and well it should. As I explained at our meeting, that perhaps 15 or 20 years ago there was reason to question the impact of golf course

maintenance on water quality, wildlife and habitat, fish and aquatic organisms, and surrounding environments. However, today those are unfounded concerns that are simply not supported by ongoing scientific based research, and in fact many newer golf courses are recognized as safe sanctuaries with an increased bio-diversity. The literature on these topics is voluminous and easily accessible on the Internet. Again I stress that these are fresh, science based, research results and not old or intuitive observations. I say that because during my visit in Alaska I was asked all sorts of questions about previously given opposition to the golf course, much of which was sincere, but pretty farfetched. Allow me to summarize this paragraph by saying that I spend a great deal of time reading and analyzing data and information about golf course maintenance, and I see no threat to me, other golfers, my family, who spend a lot of time on golf courses, or wildlife from any modern maintenance practice. At an appropriate time I would be glad to answer any questions that you or others may have about the environmental compatibility of golf. In the meantime I strongly suggest that objective, science based answers are available on the web. Perhaps someone could generate a list of the most often asked questions about a Girdwood golf course and I will prepare some answers.

Even though golf courses are safe environments it is my personal goal to do even better and design each of my golf courses to produce a marketable product with the least amounts of water, fertilizer, pesticides and fossil fuels, practical. Many of our projects have won recognition for this alone, and we continue to push that envelope because each site is different. In Girdwood the design process would begin by identifying possible sources of irrigation water, and doing pre-construction water analysis of it and surrounding water bodies and wells, to include an environmental assessment. Then selecting grasses that are best adapted to that microclimate so the lowest level of management inputs are needed. Finally make adjustments to the soil and growing conditions that will help the plants sustain themselves in the most natural way possible. Periodic monitoring of soil and water can be done to compare the impact of the golf course to baseline measurements made during planning. The ongoing maintenance would be based on Integrated Plant Management (I.P.M.) principles that seek all other solutions to a pest problem before considering pesticides as a last resort. Simplistically the concept is to use well-adapted plant materials, and to give them the best chance to flourish by emphasizing cultural methods.

Too often golf courses are thought to be playgrounds for fat, old, rich white guys instead of places to support family and community based programs and goals for both golfers and non-golfers. A well thought out golf facility should offer a world-class experience for confirmed and accomplished golfers, but it should also provide for educational opportunities to introduce interested citizens of all ages, genders and backgrounds to golf, as well as support alternate season activities such as Nordic skiing, snowshoeing, tubing, and other such winter recreation. Golf courses can also provide educational opportunities to observe and teach about nature, biological systems and wildlife patterns. The golf course maintenance staff can set the example to teach Girdwood students, residents and guests about the organic approach to plant care, composting, recycling, and cultural compatibility. Programs can be tied into school curriculums or community service activities. Cooperative programs with local environmental groups can be highlighted in a golf course setting. Golf courses can be many more things than just a place to play golf, and therefore can become a community asset.

A special interest to Girdwood area folks seems to be not only developing an extensive network of Nordic and summer hiking trails, but also anchored by a multipurpose clubhouse building. It is my understanding that some prominent members of Anchorage's Nordic community have identified the upper Girdwood Valley as the Municipality's best location for an "Olympic caliber" Nordic course. In the past our firm designed a golf course and interfacing trails in cooperation with the U.S. Equestrian Team. Perhaps at Girdwood it might be the U.S. Nordic Team. I believe that dual-purpose use would enhance the visibility of both sports, and they are compatible uses as I shall show later in this letter.

As mentioned I was shown two possible golf course sites - one I would call Lower Valley as previously proposed, and the other called Upper Valley near the Alyeska Hotel. Both sites have their own individual characteristics or personality. The lower site as previously proposed, is dominated and defined by three creeks, glacier, Virgin and California. The landform is low and flat, the vegetation is primarily alder, cottonwood and spruce, and the soils are mostly outwash sand and gravel cemented with silt and clay. Depending upon the required buffer zones to the creeks, a golf facility on the lower site would be integral to creeks with holes playing up to, and perhaps across some areas. Since the lower valley also gets less snow, it could be open two to four weeks longer (depending on which wise, old, weather sage I talked to) than the upper valley, or conversely the Nordic season would be that much shorter. The lower site might be better at attracting local traffic from Anchorage because it is a bit closer and would be easily accessible. The physical impact of the clearing and building of the golf course will be complicated by the creeks, as well as necessitate a bridge or two.

The upper valley could be characterized as mountain meadows with large wetland areas in the middle of the valley, and higher outwash ridges among their margins. Since the wet meadows seem to be at a high state of ecological succession, the golf course would avoid them as much as possible and be laid out in and among their wooded edges. This would preserve the meadows open space and function, provide spectacular views of the mountains, and simply re-establish the wooded edge zone back into more mature trees. Efforts would be made to incorporate views or sensory linkages to the creeks, but much less so than the lower valley site. The soils on the upper site seem similar but less well sorted than further down the valley, and the upper valley soils seem to have more organic matter in them. The upper valley is expected to hold spring snow longer than the lower, but this may be a good thing if a major Nordic training and recreation training and trail system is established. Without question having the golf/Nordic facility close to the largest concentration of tourists, the hotel, also makes sense to give the facility a destination resort feel. The physical and environmental impact of building the golf/Nordic area in the upper valley would be less than on the more confined lower site.

As you can see there are many issues that should be considered, studied and evaluated to determine what and where is the best land use. It is also complex enough to require the combined efforts of several knowledgeable "experts" to really nail down the important details. This process should begin by developing maps of sufficient detail and accuracy to establish confidence in precisely located features or elements. The maps now available are not accurate enough and should be redone using more sophisticated methods of mapping and topography generation. Next a preliminary but reasonably precise site survey should be done to locate such

things as rare and endangered species, special resource areas, or habitat areas requiring protection. If appropriate, there should be floodplain elevations established, any buried utilities or designated rights-of-ways, or historic preservation site(s) identified and mapped. Once all of these and other bits of information are gathered, and are placed in a standard format and scale, then a planning process can begin that would minimize impacts and maximize opportunity.

I hope to receive enough site-specific information from the Heritage Land Bank (HLB) and your planning staff to at least do a spatial analysis for the comparison of the two sites. These concept plans would be far from definitive but they may help residents, staff and consultants to decide where to focus planning resources for producing topography maps, vegetation analysis, wildlife inventories, etc. I will forward those spatial studies to you as soon as I am able to devote the time to them they deserve.

As for some specific examples that may illustrate the potential I see for a world-class golf facility in the Girdwood Valley, I would offer these five:

1. Westwood Plateau Golf Academy, Coquitlam (Vancouver), B. C.
2. The River Course at Keystone - Golf and Nordic Center, Keystone, Colorado
3. Widow's Walk Golf Course, Scituate, Massachusetts (America's first environmental demonstration project golf course)
4. Dundarave Golf Course and Golf Academy, Prince Edward Island, Canada
5. Banff Springs Golf Course, Banff Springs, Alberta

Each of these projects has elements of what the Girdwood project can be, and should be studied for their relevance, as well as their economic, social and environmental impact. We designed the first four projects and I list the fifth because it is a long-standing example of a setting very similar to the Girdwood Valley.

1. Westwood Plateau Golf Academy (pages 78 - 89 in Hurdzan/Fry book) is located on a mountain shelf above the city of Coquitlam, a suburb of Vancouver. The site is bisected by several mountain streams classified as significant fish habitat, very steep rocky slopes, several hydro right-of-ways, and heavily forested. This site was unusable for housing development and could have been ignored by the developer as a waste piece of ground. Instead he chose to build a friendly, encouraging golf learning academy that has hosted in excess of 600 youths per year. It is both a community asset that enhanced the value of homes near it, as well as a profit center and a distinguishing characteristic for the developer. For the municipality of Anchorage I would suggest that someone should look into a program called "The First Tee" ([www.thefirsttee.org](http://www.thefirsttee.org)), which is aimed at teaching disadvantaged and minor young people life skills through learning the game of golf. The learning center I envision in Girdwood would be well suited for such a program.

Provisions were made on the Westwood Plateau golf course for nightly bear crossings, protection of aquatic habitat, as well as sustainment of wood lots. The glaciated boulders and rock are part of the fabric of the golf course, as were tree stumps from historic logging, as well as migration corridors for animals. There was a net gain in wetlands because of golf course

development and trees that remained on the site are being managed to a healthier condition. The project is about 10 - 12 years old.

2. Keystone in Colorado was originally developed as a ski resort but later became a four seasons venue with the addition of summer recreation to include golf. The River Course was designed by Hurdzan/Fry (pages 282 - 293 of Hurdzan/Fry book) and opened two years ago to rave reviews by golfers and golf travel writers. There are a couple of facets about this project that are significant to the Girdwood vision.

First the golf course is bisected by the Snake River, a highly regulated and protected fishing stream that terminates into Lake Dillon, a major water reservoir for the city of Denver. One golf hole plays across the stream while others play along or up to its banks. Environmental concerns included protection of the river from pesticides and fertilizers, fisherman access, phosphate loading, and overall water quality. After extensive scrutiny during the permit process, construction and now during operation, there has never been any measured or reported impact of golf on the Snake River.

The River Course is also part of an ancient elk winter migration corridor, and the elk seem quite content to linger on the golf course in the winter. Of course all other mountain critters also still use the golf course land freely. The golf course seems to have no impact on animal usage.

Another significant relationship to Girdwood is that the clubhouse for The River Course was designed specifically to service both a golf operation and a Nordic and snowshoe operation. These are sympathetic uses and there is every reason why the Girdwood facility should do the same. The winter activity will not harm the golf course as long as there is six to eight inches of snow, and greens and sand bunkers are appropriately marked or protected. Again this is a good case study for what Girdwood could be for Keystone has found it to be a great addition to their winter offerings as well as help expand visitors awareness of the magic of Nordic sport.

3. This third example is meant to specifically address those environmental concerns that believe golf course maintenance is dangerous to people, wildlife or groundwater. The project is called Widow's Walk built in a used up sand and gravel quarry on Boston's South Shore in the Town of Scituate (see enclosure), or [www.golfcapecod.com/widowswalk](http://www.golfcapecod.com/widowswalk). The site is bounded by the tidal marshes of the North River, and is in close proximity to Cape Cod Bay. The soils are extremely sandy and there is a town drinking water well right in the middle of the golf course site that is continuously monitored. The golf course is about six years old and there has never been any detection of any unwanted chemical, despite being a heavily played public golf course. The golf course is designated as America's First Environmental Demonstration Project Golf Course, because it was planned in conjunction with environmentalists to test ideas on how to make golf courses more benign to their surroundings. The bird and animal populations have been monitored by local conservation groups, and all have risen since the golf course was constructed.

4. The Dunderave Golf Course and Canadian Golf Academy (pages 242 - 255 in Hurdzan/Fry book) was built on Prince Edward Island, along the Canadian Atlantic coast as part of the Brudenell River Resort. This golf facility has a limited period of operation due to the long and cold winters. Specifically the golf course was constructed on land abutting the Brudenell River, which is an important fish and shellfish habitat. The golf course development and maintenance have never been shown as a problem to the river, wetlands, vernal pools, or wooded habitat. Moreover it has been observed that wildlife seems more plentiful on the meadow areas of the golf course than was previously observed in previous pastureland.

The Canadian Golf Academy at Brudenell River was designed and built at a low cost to encourage bringing beginners into golf. The total facility includes an indoor hitting area, large driving range, short game center, putting greens, practice holes and a 9-hole family course that caters to beginners. This facility, like one possible in Girdwood, was meant to provide total, friendly, affordable, entry level introductory experience for non-golfers, and to help confirmed golfers get better. It permits lesson programs of one to five days, with one-half day for golf and the other half-day to enjoy other local attractions. For more information see their website at [www.canadiangolfacademy.ca/cdngolf](http://www.canadiangolfacademy.ca/cdngolf).

5. A final case study is Banff Springs, Alberta, Canada, which was developed about 120 years ago in the heart of the Canadian Rockies. In the 1920s a golf course was added and now there are several in the area to help satisfy the summer tourist trade. Not only can the sheer beauty of the Banff Springs area be matched in Girdwood, so can a golf course in that setting also become internationally famous. There is a fairly good cross-fertilization of skiers and golfers so the fame of the golf course would attract writers for both types of magazines. The success of golf in Banff speaks to the potential success that golf could have in Girdwood.

This is a rather long letter that I trust communicates the vision that many of us have for the Girdwood Valley. Pictures and stories of Westwood Plateau, The River Course at Keystone, and Dunderave can be found in the book I gave you. In addition the Internet can provide much more information than I could provide, and it is only a click away.

Once I have had time to do a spatial study for golf in the Girdwood Valley, I will send it along with my analysis.

Thank you again for your hospitality.

Respectfully,

Michael J. Hurdzan, Ph.D.  
*ASGCA*

Enc: Widow's Walk

Westwood Plateau Golf Academy Features

Cc: Per Bjorn-Roli- Co-Chair - Girdwood 2020  
Toby Preston - Co-Chair - Girdwood 2020  
Tom Yeager - Glacier Valley Development Corporation  
Jim Barnett - Glacier Valley Development Corporation  
Chris von Imhof - Vice President - Alyeska Resort  
George Cannelos - Director - Heritage Land Bank  
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