

OUR VIEW

City of Detroit Lakes needs to bite the bullet and clear sidewalks

Detroit Lakes Tribune Editorial Board

Sidewalks in Detroit Lakes have been a mess this winter. Some haven't been cleared of snow all season, while on others snow removal has been inconsistent or crosswalks have been blocked.

It was good to see a group of Holy Rosary students get together on Wednesday to clear a "Safe Routes to School" sidewalk on Rossman Avenue across the street from Rossman Elementary School. Their enthusiasm and public-mindedness was great to see. In a few hours, they were able to accomplish what the city hasn't all winter.

But it shouldn't have to come to that.

For the rest of this winter, the city should step up to serve its residents, and at least clear out the worst of the uncleared areas. There are still at least two months of winter left, and people shouldn't have to walk in the streets that whole time.

The flurry over sidewalks this winter started with Public Works Director Shawn King, who joined the city in February of 2020, trying to follow a 13-year-old city ordinance that was passed during a budget crisis and had never really been enforced before. That ordinance requires property owners to clear snow and ice off the sidewalks in front of their homes and businesses within 72 hours. If they fail, the city will do it for them, and they will be assessed or sued for the



Nathan Bowe / Tribune

Rossman Elementary School students had to walk in the street for weeks because of this snow-covered sidewalk on Rossman Avenue. The sidewalk was just cleared this Wednesday by student volunteers from Holy Rosary School.

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cost of the job.

Since beginning to enforce it this year, city workers have hung snow-removal notices on some 300 doors, and sent notices to some 100 businesses. Many have complied, but others have not, and some of those unwalkable sidewalks are starting to look like casualties in a battle of wills between the city and property owners.

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Many of the city's Safe Routes to School sidewalks — on Rossman Avenue and

Forest Street, at least — are right next to the street, with no grassy area in-between. It wouldn't even require a Bobcat loader to do the job — a regular city plow should be able to lift its blade over the curb and take that snow out.

Even the former hit-or-miss system, where city crews cleared public sidewalks when they had the time, is better than what we have now. At least most sidewalks were passable for most of the winter.

The city assesses property owners for the cost of replacing public sidewalks just like it assesses for street improvements. Residents aren't expected to clear public streets, why are they required to clear public sidewalks? In the

long term, why not treat public sidewalks the same way the city treats public streets? Clear the snow so the sidewalks are passable.

That would benefit those residents who can't clear the snow themselves, and have trouble paying someone else to do it. We're not blaming them for not shoveling — sometimes it's just not possible.

We like Mayor Matt Brenk's idea of having the city provide sidewalk-clearing services next winter, or at least taking a look at the budget numbers in August.

"We increased our levy by over 10% and it's going to increase the taxes on a medium-valued home in Detroit Lakes by \$24, so it might not be that big of a deal to fold those costs into our budget for next year," Brenk said at a recent City Council meeting.

Providing sidewalk clearing would be a great way for the average resident to see their tax dollars at work.

If the city Public Works Department can't do the job, the city should bite the bullet and hire out sidewalk-clearing to a private contractor. King previously told the City Council that it would cost about \$94,000 to hire a contractor to clear all sidewalks over the course of a tough winter — which he defined as 15 "snow events" that each dropped more than 6 inches of the white stuff.

Detroit Lakes is a growing city with a healthy tax base. It can do better than this.

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Detroit Country Club management should stay in local hands

Detroit Country Club in Detroit Lakes is one of the gems in lakes country. It is home to the popular Pine to Palm tournament each August and a summer playground for the Fargo-Moorhead lake crowd, in addition to being the top golf course locals play.

Despite being deemed a country club, the 36-hole facility is open to the public and owned by the city of Detroit Lakes. The club has nine board members, three appointed by the city, and there is an operating agreement between the city and board.

There is a kerfuffle going on over the management of Detroit Country Club, about which a handful of Fargo-Moorhead golfers who play at DCC told me. The rub is this: The DCC board of directors in December presented a proposal to the city that would have Troon, a Scottsdale, Arizona-based golf course management company, take over management of Detroit Country Club.

Detroit Lakes mayor Matt Brenk said the board made an informational presentation at a workshop session. To date, no action has been taken by the council.

Troon is a huge operation that deals mostly in resort or destination golf. It manages more than 650 golf courses in the U.S. and internationally. While Troon's bread and butter is higher-end resorts or daily-fee courses in warm-weather locales (like Arizona!), it does manage some small-scale country clubs and public courses, too.



MIKE McFEELY

Fargo Country Club has been under Troon management for several years. Two Duluth municipal courses are managed by Troon. Troon-managed operations are known for being extremely corporate.

The possibility of Detroit Country Club coming under the auspices of Troon has resulted in some pushback locally.

As is always the case — especially in the often-cloistered world of golf — the accusations are flying about why a successful local public golf course in a small Minnesota city would turn over its operations to a corporate giant based in Arizona.

The board's reasoning, as outlined by president and Detroit Lakes lawyer Sam Rufer, is this as reported by the local newspaper (the Detroit Lakes Tribune):

"We got to a point, kind of in the middle of the season last year, where we really decided that the current way of doing things wasn't working anymore. The operation had gotten so big out there, the golf course industry landscape had kind of shifted to the point that the way we are doing things with the board basically being the day-to-day, on-the-ground management of the Detroit Country Club just doesn't work anymore. I'm an attorney, I don't know how to run a restaurant

and I don't know how to run a golf course, so we started looking at options for how we fix that, what can we do about it?"

I have no reason to doubt Rufer's and the board's sincerity. I have no dog in this fight. Haven't played DCC in many years, despite being an avid golfer. But, being an avid golfer, I am reasonably well-connected to local golfers and those in the golf industry. I can say this with confidence: The golf community isn't buying what the board is selling.

Among the reasons that have been floated to me about why the board wants to turn operations over to Troon (and these are admittedly based on nothing but the personal beliefs of those who floated them to me, but since this is a blog I can have some latitude in sharing them):

-The same people who pushed Fargo Country Club to Troon are trying to do the same thing at Detroit Country Club.

-Troon members are allowed access to other Troon facilities, so those doing the pushing in Detroit Lakes are doing it so they can have access to courses in Arizona and other locations.

-The board is trying to push out longtime PGA club pro and current general manager Mark Holm, who has been at DCC for decades.

-The real issue is the restaurant/bar, which like many golf course restaurant/bars ranges from problematic to disastrous, which the board spent \$400,000 to renovate recently and yet can't seem to get the management

right.

-Some members want to turn DCC into more of a private country club than the public facility it currently is.

-The board is just farming out its duties to a management company.

Whatever the reasons behind the proposed change, the city council will have to make a decision soon because — hard to believe looking out the window right now — golf season is fast approaching and the DCC board wants Troon in place by this spring.

My two cents: Farming out the management of Detroit Country Club to Troon would be a mistake. Troon is thoroughly corporate and DCC just isn't a corporate place. It is a comfortable public golf facility in a small lakes area city that needs a local general manager, not a national/international management company running it like a factory.

And if the problem truly is the restaurant/bar, do board members think there is a magic bullet that's suddenly going to make a bunch of money? Seems unlikely.

Golf has boomed the last couple of years because of the pandemic. I'm told the finances of Detroit Country Club are very strong. Hire a local GM who answers to the board, separate from the PGA professional, to run the place. Isn't that what boards are supposed to do?

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