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For Golf Course In Red, No Greens Fees For Politicians

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INVESTIGATIONS



As Oak Lawn’s public golf course loses millions, current and former elected officials and their families are allowed to play for free, and enjoy other

recreation perks.

While most locals have to shell out up to \$22 to play 18 holes at the taxpayer-owned Stony Creek Golf Course in Oak Lawn, dozens of political figures and other VIPs are allowed to play for free.

More than 60 people - many current and former government officials and their family members - have taken advantage of roughly 350 complimentary rounds of golf at Stony Creek in the past two years, records and interviews reveal.

Seven political figures alone played nearly 170 of those rounds, the records show.

Five of those people were recipients of special lifetime "gold cards" guaranteeing gratis golf - and free access to other park programs and facilities in town. A local ordinance passed in 1993 also grants free recreation to past and present park commissioners, "appointed personnel" and their families.



*Oak Lawn Park District "gold card,"
providing free golf and other recreation
perks*

It's a perk that's persisted even as revenues have plunged at the golf course, which lost more than \$2 million over the past decade. And the Oak Lawn Park District, which runs the links, has steadily increased property taxes in the middle-class south suburb.

Even so, Maddie Kelly, executive director of the park district, defended the gold cards, saying she doesn't want to do away with them and insisting the free golf doesn't seriously affect Stony Creek's bottom line.

"It's never been abused to the point where I had to say, 'We need to take care of this gold card business because we are losing a ton of money on this,'" Kelly said.



Stony Creek Golf Course's clubhouse

It's unclear how much potential revenue was lost to the freebies but, assuming each golfer played nine holes and didn't get free club and cart rentals, the number is at least \$5,000, according to a Better Government Association analysis.

Former Worth Township Highway Commissioner Steve Loulouis, who used to serve on the park board, played 76 free rounds of golf since 2014, the most of any gold card holder, records show.

Alex Kazmierczak played 47 free games of golf since 2014, the second highest total, records show. He's a former park commissioner now on the Oak Lawn Appeals Board and the board of a non-profit affiliated with the park district, the Oak Lawn Parks Foundation.

"I didn't institute it," Kazmierczak said about the gold card program. "I was awarded to it."



The first hole at Stony Creek

Former state Sen. Ed Maloney (D-Chicago) was given a gold card when he retired from the Legislature in 2012. He's played three free rounds at Stony Creek since 2014. He said he's also used his gold card to cover a \$20 chalk drawing class in 2013.

When he was in the Illinois Senate, Maloney helped the park district secure more than \$1 million in grant money to build an addition to the recreation center. His political campaign also paid \$41,317 to host fundraisers at Stony Creek over the years, but Maloney said there were no discounts given to him for the events.

The park district also has given certificates for free golf to state Reps. Kelly Burke (D-Evergreen Park), Mary Flowers (D-Chicago) and Frances Ann Hurley (D-Chicago), as well as to state Sens. Jacqueline Collins (D-Chicago) and Bill Cunningham (D-Chicago), records show.



A golfer tees off at Stony Creek one recent day

Cunningham and Collins said they returned the passes, and Burke said she couldn't remember receiving one. Hurley and Flowers could not be reached for comment.

Former Oak Lawn Mayor David Heilmann, who lost his mayoral re-election bid in 2013, played four rounds of complimentary golf in the past two years. A park district commissioner from 1989 to 2001, Heilmann said that he "usually pays" when he golfs at Stony Creek or hits balls on the driving range, but does have a gold card.

Elected officials can accept gifts in some instances but must report them on publicly available economic interest statements if the value is \$500 or more.

Oak Lawn Park Commissioner Sue Murphy, who played three rounds of free golf since 2014, said the gold cards are a reward for elected officials' service.

"This is a little gift is the way I look at it," Murphy said. "It's a little 'thank you.'"



This column - a regular feature called The Public Eye, appearing in the Chicago Sun-Times - was written and reported by the Better Government Association's Casey Toner, who can be reached at (312) 386-9201 or ctoner@bettergov.org.



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