

DeLaveaga Golf Course

How City Policies and Practices Have Affected the Bottom Line

Summary

It is like watching untended grass grow. You do not really notice it until one day, one month, one decade later, it becomes obvious that it needs attention and the value of its very existence is questioned. This seems to be the case with the City of Santa Cruz's DeLaveaga Golf Course.

The year 2020 will mark the 50th anniversary of the opening of Santa Cruz's DeLaveaga Golf Course. Originally envisioned as a self-sustaining enterprise, the golf course has consistently lost money for the City during recent years of operation. Santa Cruz is heavily dependent on a one-billion dollar tourist industry, which includes many outdoor activities including golf. Currently, DeLaveaga Golf Course adds deficits to a general fund that is already stressed from growing pension liability costs and facility sustainment debt.

This report examines DeLaveaga Golf Course's finances and operations, its use of City resources, and the role of a private operator managing and maintaining the golf course. The investigation found that water and labor costs continue to outpace revenues and course usage, which has declined in recent years. We will address controlling costs and increasing play, which could raise overall revenues and move the golf course toward self-sustainability. This report is intended to provide insight and clarity into DeLaveaga Golf Course's costs, revenue, water usage/pricing and opportunity.

Background

DeLaveaga Golf Course is a 250-acre, 18-hole, 6010-yard course, which is owned by the City of Santa Cruz and serves the local community of Santa Cruz County. It is known for its hilly terrain, abundant trees, diverse layout and affordable prices. With the recent closure of Scotts Valley Gardens Golf Course, it is now only one of two fully public golf courses, including Seascape, within 15 miles of the City of Santa Cruz. It hosts individual golf, tournaments, school competitions, disk golf, practice range, practice greens, professional lessons, youth golf training, and has a retail pro shop and full-service restaurant and bar.

The golf course is part of DeLaveaga Park, which became City and County property when the estate of Jose Vincente DeLaveaga bequeathed it in 1900. DeLaveaga Park is now home to ballfields, picnic and playgrounds, a disk golf course, riding and hiking trails, an archery range, Shakespeare Santa Cruz, the County's 911 emergency operations center and an 18-hole golf course, which is the subject of this report.

The course was designed by golf course architect Bert Stamps and opened for play in 1970. Of its 250 acres, 70 are maintained and irrigated. In 1991 the driving range and automated irrigation system were added. In 2005, there was a major course renovation, which reconfigured holes and expanded the practice area. Disk golf baskets, known as holes, were added on the course in 2019, thereby expanding the availability of disk golf.

DeLaveaga Golf Course is managed by the City of Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Department. The City's Economic Development Department is responsible for contracting with and managing the vendors and operators associated with the course. The City of Santa Cruz has contracted with private companies, GSL and Dela Upper Park, both owned by the Loustalot family, to manage and operate the golf course and its concessions. In 2016, the course's restaurant/lodge operator's lease expired, and a new 10-year lease agreement was granted to Loustalot, Inc., consolidating the golf course and the restaurant/lodge operations. The restaurant/lodge has been closed for renovations and repairs since 2016, with an original estimate of approximately \$300,000 to the City, costs ultimately rose to nearly \$1 million to the City of Santa Cruz. The Operator also paid for a portion of renovations. The restaurant/lodge is set to re-open in 2020.

A new DeLaveaga Golf Course Operations Plan^[1] was presented at the September 10, 2019 meeting of the Santa Cruz City Council.^{[2] [3]} This plan relies heavily on findings from two reports developed by outside consultant groups: a 2010 report from Keyser Marston Associates^[4] and a 2018 report from Pro Forma Advisors.^[5] The DeLaveaga Golf Course Marketing Plan,^[6] prepared by the Operator of the course, was introduced at the November 4, 2019 meeting of the City of Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Commission.^[7] The timeline in Figure 1 was created from data in these documents.

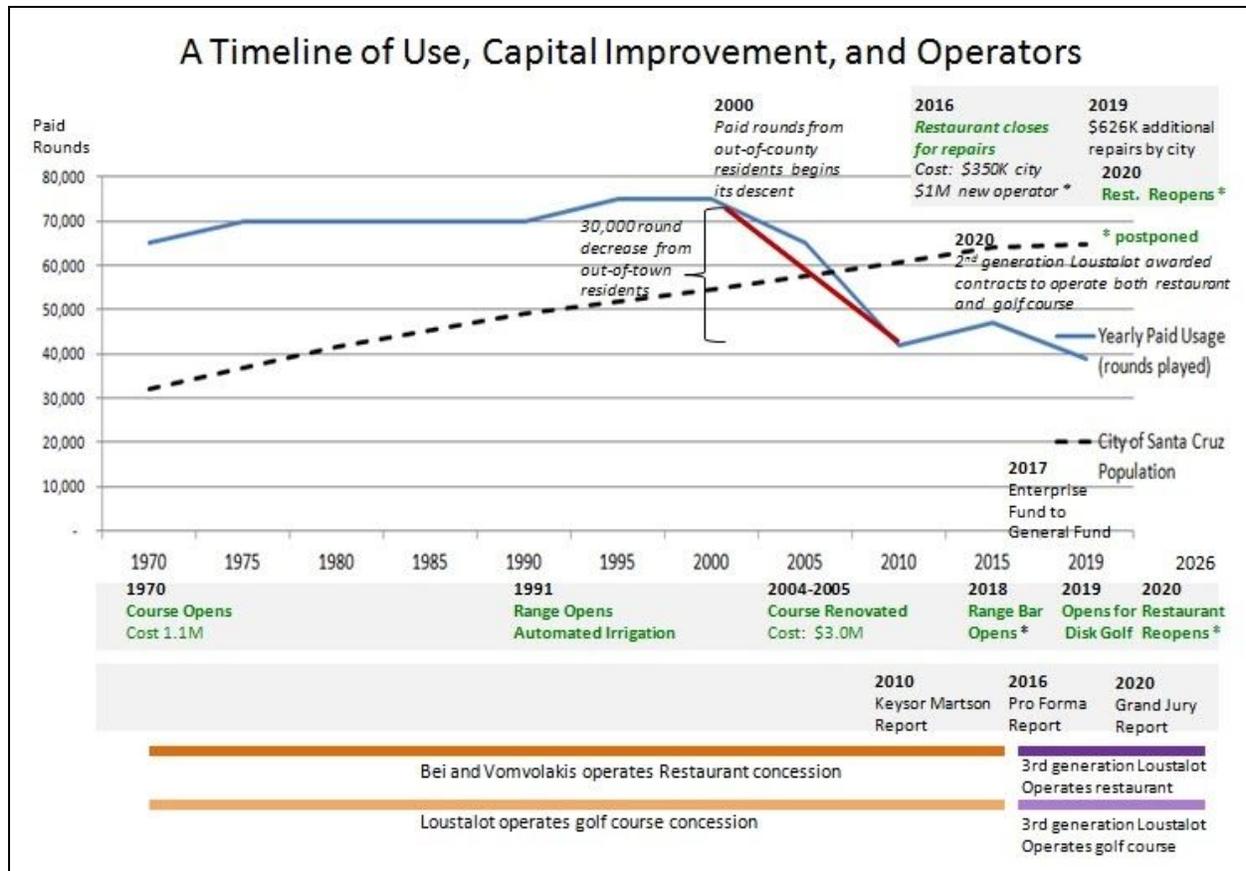


Figure 1. **DeLaveaga Golf Course Timeline** (Source: Grand Jury graph of data in documents^[8] ^[9] ^[10])

In 2016, with recommendations from the City of Santa Cruz’s Finance Department, the golf course changed its accounting method from an enterprise fund to a General Fund activity. According to the Pro Forma report, debt service and costs related to the golf course are now part of the City of Santa Cruz’s General Fund, rather than part of the golf course operations. The two largest City-incurred expenses for the golf course are personnel (~\$1 million), and water (~\$500 thousand). DeLaveaga Golf Course has been operating at a deficit for the last several years with a projected deficit at least through 2023. The DeLaveaga Golf Course does provide revenue opportunities and in a perfect world could be self-supporting or even revenue generating. According to the Pro Forma Report projections (Figure 2), losses dip in fiscal year 2020, but the losses then continue through at least fiscal year 2023.

Table II-2: DeLaveaga Golf Course Projected Net Operating Income (\$000)						
	Actual FY2016	FY2019	FY2020	FY2021	FY2022	FY2023
City Revenues						
Greens Fees	\$1,337	\$1,414	\$1,601	\$1,657	\$1,715	\$1,774
Utility Surcharge	---	176	180	180	180	180
Concession Rent	148	195	201	205	209	213
Total	\$1,485	\$1,786	\$1,982	\$2,042	\$2,104	\$2,167
Expenses						
Operating Expense	\$1,439	\$2,177	\$2,257	\$2,336	\$2,413	\$2,528
Capital Improvement Res	79	102	104	106	108	110
Debt Service	285	---	---	---	---	---
City Internal Services	157	12	12	13	13	13
Total	\$1,960	\$2,291	\$2,373	\$2,455	\$2,533	\$2,651
Net Operating Income	(\$475)	(\$505)	(\$391)	(\$413)	(\$430)	(\$484)

Figure 2. Pro Forma Projections^[11]

A large portion of the projected increase in Operating Expenditure Budget is due to projected increases in the cost of water,^[12] which has roughly doubled since 2016. Some of these increases have been partially offset by an additional \$4 per round utility charge.^[13]

Despite best-case revenue scenarios, even the City's Parks & Recreation Draft Operations Plan projects continued losses through fiscal year 2022 (Figure 3).

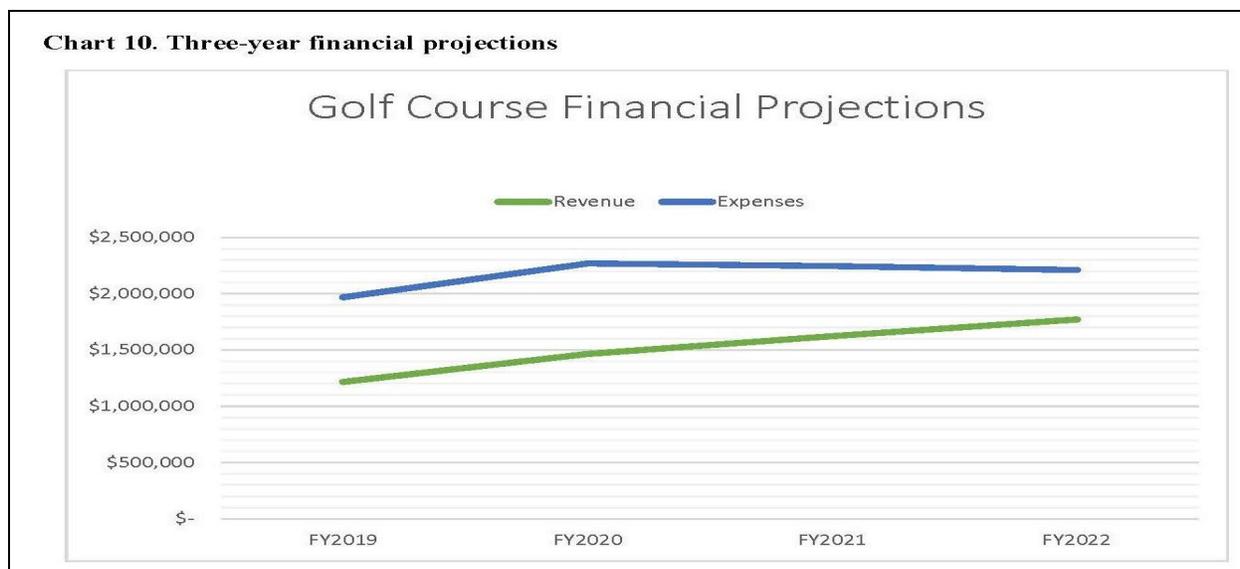


Figure 3. Three-year Financial Projections^[14]

According to the DeLaveaga Golf Course Draft Operations Plan the revenues generated by the golf course can be summarized as follows: The lion's share of revenue for the City of Santa Cruz is generated by green fees (approximately \$1,400,000 in 2019). The Operator gets most of the revenue generated by concessions, food and beverage, pro shop merchandise, golf lessons, driving range and golf cart rentals.

DeLaveaga Golf Course's rate structure is comparable to other local public courses (Seascape and Pajaro Valley); there are not significant differences between regular, loyal, senior, twilight, weekday and weekend rates according to the Pro Forma Report.^[15]

Scope and Methodology

This investigation focused on the City of Santa Cruz's cost of operations and revenues of the DeLaveaga Golf Course, and not the cost of operations provided by the private Operator. The Grand Jury focused on the history, governance, use, costs, and revenue of the golf course. The Grand Jury's intention is to provide additional information on those topics along with recommendations to City of Santa Cruz leadership.

In addition to the reports cited elsewhere, the Grand Jury also reviewed the 2002 DeLaveaga Park Master Plan,^[16] the 2019 and 2020 Annual Budgets,^{[17] [18]} water rate schedules,^{[19] [20]} employee pay schedules,^[21] and related [websites](#).

The Grand Jury interviewed the City of Santa Cruz staff and management associated with DeLaveaga Golf Course operations, the Operator, Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation management, Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Commission members and attended their meetings. The Grand Jury also made site visits to DeLaveaga Golf Course.

Investigation

For 47 years the City of Santa Cruz awarded restaurant concession contracts to the Bei and Vomvolakis families and the golf course concession contracts to the Loustalot family. In 2016, two 10-year contracts^{[22] [23] [24]} were awarded to the companies GSL and Dela Upper Park Incorporated, known as the Operator, both owned by third generation members of the Loustalot Family. These contracts are for the operation of the restaurant and golf course concessions. The Operator pays the City of Santa Cruz between 7% and 10% of revenue generated by the restaurant, driving range, pro shop and other concessions along with 93% of the fees collected for golf course play.

The City of Santa Cruz is responsible for maintaining the golf course and facilities, including most utility costs. The Operator is responsible for reservations, green fees collection, merchandising, driving range, golf cart rental, instruction and operating the restaurant/lodge.

Administration

Administration of the DeLaveaga Golf Course is primarily based on the contract between the City of Santa Cruz and the Operator. The City's Parks and Recreation

Department receives guidance and advice from the City's Parks and Recreation Commission, the Operator, and the City's Public Works Department. The City of Santa Cruz has outsourced past studies and used them to make management and marketing decisions, contract formulation and rate structures regarding the course.

Operations Plan

The City of Santa Cruz's Parks and Recreation Department drafted a Golf Course Operations Plan, presented it to the City Council in September 2019 and updated it in November 2019. As of May 1, 2020 the Golf Course Operations Plan has not been re-presented to the Santa Cruz City Council or adopted. The November 2019 update addressed the broader DeLaveaga Park, which includes the golf course. The November 2019 update is more of an operations strategy than a plan since it does not include specific activities that will be performed, by whom (Operator or City of Santa Cruz department), and when the activities will or should be performed.

The Operations Plan addressed pricing, usage, value to the community, summary level expenses and environmental impact. The plan does not address how the City of Santa Cruz manages and works with the Operator. Nor does it define specific roles and responsibilities, staffing requirements, facility inspections and maintenance, capital improvements, financial goals, contingencies, or risk management pertaining to the golf course. The Operations Plan includes historical water and utility prices, but it does not include historical water usage, nor targets for future use.

Marketing Plan

The Operator had a marketing plan developed and presented to the City of Santa Cruz's Parks and Recreation Department in November 2019. It primarily addressed a strategy and plan to market the recently repaired and refurbished restaurant/lodge.^[25] The restaurant has been closed for over three years due to rot, decay, and deferred maintenance which resulted in major reconstruction and costs to the City of Santa Cruz and the Operator.^[26] The marketing plan does not address how to increase golf course usage, from local and out-of-county players, other than the attraction from the restaurant's reopening. This will be addressed in the findings.

In the year 2000, DeLaveaga Golf Course began to see a decline from approximately 70,000 rounds of golf per year to the current 40,000 rounds (see Figure 1 above). According to the City of Santa Cruz's Parks and Recreation Department, at the course's peak, two thirds of play came from out-of-county players whereas today it is only one third. The usage by in-county residents has decreased only slightly.^[27] The drop in the number of rounds played per year represents a significant drop in revenue for the City of Santa Cruz and the Operator while fixed costs continue to rise.

No-Charge and Reduced Charge Play

DeLaveaga Golf Course provides low cost and no cost play to support a wide variety of organizations. These include school golf teams, youth groups such as the Boy Scouts and girls' clubs, school and hospital fundraising organizations, religious and community

charitable organizations and service groups. This amounted to approximately 5000 rounds in 2019.^[28] It should be noted that a reduced rate discount card is offered to seniors, if they are residents of the City of Santa Cruz. Deep discounts, as low as \$5 per round, are also provided to youth on weekdays. As of May 1, 2020 these youth rates were not advertised on the course's website.

Operation Expenses

As noted earlier, the City of Santa Cruz is responsible for maintaining the golf course and its facilities, including a pro rata share of utility costs. These costs are accounted for by the City of Santa Cruz General Fund and are offset by golf course use fees plus a percent of the sales revenue generated by the restaurant and other concessions provided by the Operator.

Over the last decade, the cost of operation of the course to the City has increased significantly, driven by increased labor costs and constantly rising water rates.

Labor and Its Cost

The City of Santa Cruz maintains the golf course and its related facilities, which include the restaurant/lodge, proshop, driving range/cart barn, parking lot, and golf course storage/maintenance sheds. They do this using City staff, with the exception of activities associated with major facility repair and parking lot paving. The number of staff at the golf course is at the low end of what the Pro Forma report recommends. The turnover rate for the golf course maintenance staff has been low given their seniority. This situation has been pointed out in the draft Operations Plan.

The City of Santa Cruz's compensation schedule has 10 steps, A through J for all City positions except some "at will" leadership positions.^[29] The compensation schedule is a byproduct of negotiations with the unions, to which most city employees belong.

Based on the City's 2019 Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (CAFR), the Grand Jury created Figure 4 to show staffing profiles that reflect the current employees plus two alternatives that could be future targets to replace employees that retire. Again, the intent here is to assess the longer-term cost reduction opportunity.

Figure 5 was also created by the Grand Jury using the same document reflecting the cost of those three staffing profiles along with the cost differential. Normal pension costs are included in Figure 5, but healthcare expenses and unfunded pension liabilities are not included.

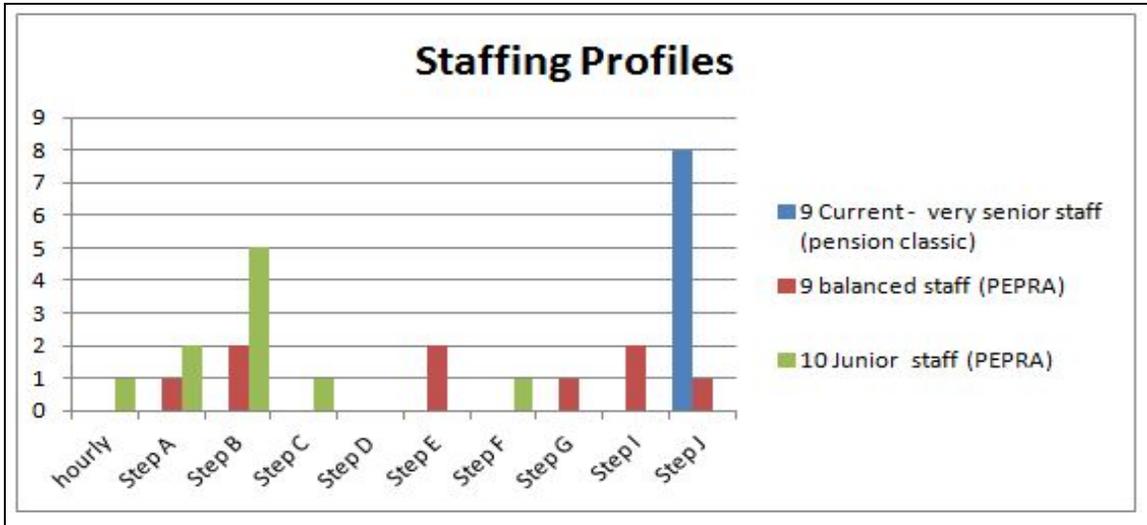


Figure 4. **Staffing Profiles** (Source: Grand Jury graph of data in document^[30])

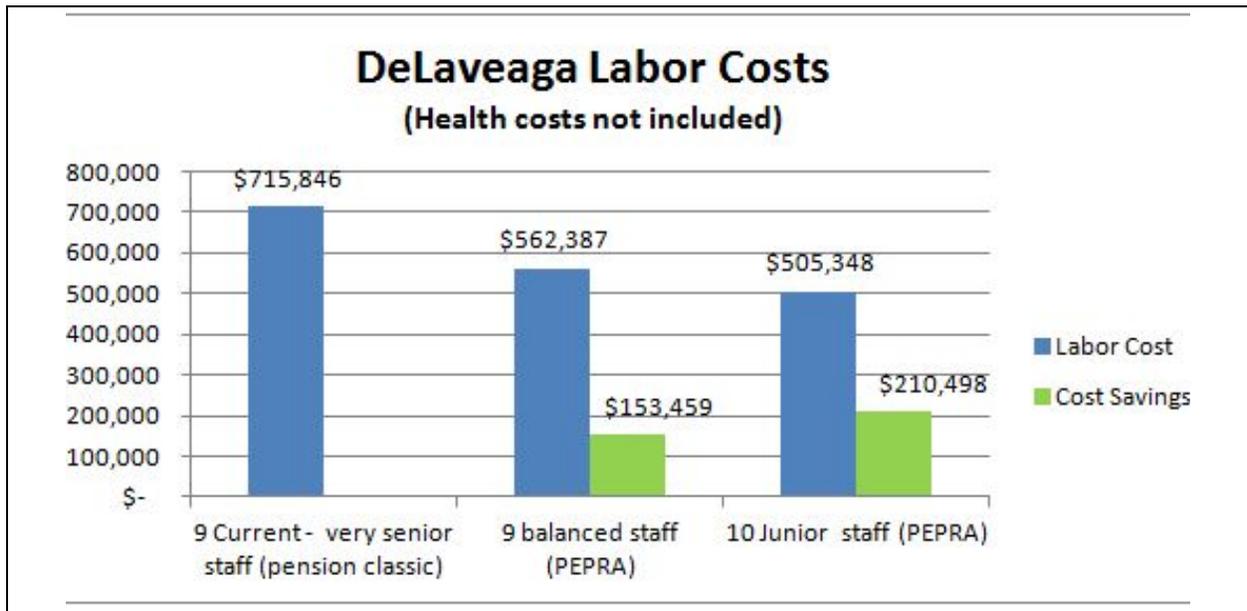


Figure 5. **DeLaveaga Labor Costs** (Source: Grand Jury graph of data in documents^{[31] [32]})

Water and its Cost

The cost of water, for all Santa Cruz residents, has increased dramatically over the last several years. For DeLaveaga Golf Course, aside from the cost of labor, water is the biggest expense. In fiscal year 2019, that cost was \$523,000, with the golf course purchasing approximately 32 million gallons of water or 43,000 CCF (centum cubic feet).^{[33] [34] [35]}

The price of water for DeLaveaga Golf Course has more than doubled the last four years. City of Santa Cruz properties, which generally require water to operate, receive no special rates even though a property such as DeLaveaga Golf Course, which

requires a large amount of water to maintain, has taken extreme measures in water conservation such as not watering areas of limited use. The golf course is provided with a water budget. If it exceeds the budget, the rate increases.

The reduction in water usage has created a sacrifice in the quality of play and visual appeal to existing and new users of DeLaveaga Golf Course. This is apparent in the holes leading up to and seen from the pro shop and restaurant/lodge, as seen in Figure 6.



Figure 6. **Photographs; DeLaveaga Water Conservation Impact** (Photos taken during site visit)

Capital Improvement and Sustainment Expenses

The City owns the land and the structures on DeLaveaga Golf Course. Since operations began in 1970, the City has maintained the facilities it contracts out to operate. The City of Santa Cruz's procedure is to conduct annual safety inspections of the property. Of concern is that over a million dollars in recent repairs to the restaurant/lodge to make it code compliant were, in part, driven by lack of regular routine maintenance inspections by the City.

Findings

- F1.** The DeLaveaga Golf Course is underutilized and has the opportunity for generating increased revenue for the City of Santa Cruz and the Operator.
- F2.** The DeLaveaga Golf Course has high city employee labor costs relative to other local, privately owned golf courses. This is partly due to its use of senior maintenance personnel and the pension benefits negotiated between the union employees and the City of Santa Cruz.
- F3.** Water conservation strategies have been successfully employed at the DeLaveaga Golf Course to the detriment of appearance in some locations. Significant increases in the cost of water have negated positive impacts to the bottom line.
- F4.** The City of Santa Cruz's failure to conduct thorough, regular on-site inspections of the DeLaveaga Golf Course's restaurant/lodge resulted in excessive renovation costs to the City of Santa Cruz. This contributed to more than doubling the original estimates to bring the building up to code.
- F5.** The new draft Operations Plan lacks the necessary robustness to communicate how major golf course operations will be managed at DeLaveaga Golf Course, including but not limited to facility inspections, water use policies, variable pricing policies, charitable policies, operations review, and basic roles, responsibilities, and authority.
- F6.** The DeLaveaga Golf Course website is not up to date and should include all current information regarding costs to various players and groups such as discounted youth green fees.

Recommendations

- R1.** The City of Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Department should develop additional marketing activities that focus on increasing play going forward. Those should include, but not be limited to, re-focusing relationships with local Chambers of Commerce, service clubs, "Visit Santa Cruz County", NCGA Associate Golf Clubs, youth and senior groups, local charitable organizations, educational institutions, and religious groups. (F1)
- R2.** The City of Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Department and the Operator should coordinate evaluation of the pricing model for green fees in order to remain competitive with local golf courses and maximize revenue for the start of 2021. (F1, F5)
- R3.** The City of Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Department should develop a staffing profile for planning purposes based on need, cost, and quality of service. This profile should compare DeLaveaga Golf Course's maintenance staff and cost compared to other local golf courses and be used as a basis for hiring or rotating staff. This should be performed on an ongoing basis. (F2)

- R4.** Inform the public and increase awareness of the DeLaveaga Golf Course’s water usage and cost for the last 10 years by publicizing its calculations and actual numbers beginning as soon as feasible. (F3)
- R5.** The City of Santa Cruz City Manager should perform a lessons learned activity and then update the City’s relevant policies and operating procedures to avoid a future repeat of the DeLaveaga Golf Course’s restaurant/lodge shutdown and renovation no later than second quarter 2021. (F4)
- R6.** The City of Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Department and the City of Santa Cruz City Manager should add a formal process to the Operation Plan by addressing needed capital improvements, maintenance schedules, facility inspections, water use, variable pricing, charitable policies, operations review, and basic stakeholder roles and responsibilities. Stakeholders include the Santa Cruz City Council, the City’s Parks and Recreation Department, the City’s Parks & Recreation Commission, the Operator, the DeLaveaga Golf Course Superintendent, the City’s Building Department and the City’s Public Works Department. (F5)
- R7.** The City of Santa Cruz’s Parks and Recreation Department should validate that delaveagagolf.com includes youth pricing and current information regarding DeLaveaga’s restaurant and golf course by the end of 2020. (F6)

Commendations

- C1.** The Grand Jury would like to recognize that the DeLaveaga Golf Course maintenance staff has performed exemplary work in maintaining the course, given its reduction in staff and unfortunate constraints on water use.

Required Responses

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Findings</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>Respond Within/ Respond By</i>
City of Santa Cruz City Council	F1, F2, F4	R5	90 Days September 14, 2020

Requested Responses

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Findings</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>Respond Within/ Respond By</i>
City of Santa Cruz City Manager	F1, F2, F4	R5, R6	90 Days September 14, 2020
City of Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Director	F1 -F6	R1 - R7	90 Days September 14, 2020

Defined Terms

- **CAFR:** Comprehensive Annual Financial Report
- **CCF:** 1 centum cubic feet (also called HCF, hundred cubic feet) = 748.052 gallons
- **Disc Golf:** a game in which a concave plastic disc is thrown into each of a series of metal baskets situated on an outdoor course, the object being to complete the course using the fewest possible throws
- **NCGA:** Northern California Golf Association
- **PEPRA:** Public Employees Pension Reform Act (start date January 1, 2013). PEPRA changed the way CalPERS retirement and health benefits are applied, and places compensation limits on members.
- **Pro Forma Report:** The Market and Economic Evaluation of DeLaveaga Golf Course, version 1.2, prepared by Pro Forma Associates, LLC. in 2018.
- **UAL:** Unfunded Accrued Liability. It represents the market value of assets. minus the discounted value of the future liabilities.

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Site Visits

DeLaveaga Golf Course

DeLaveaga Disk Golf Course

DeLaveaga Golf Course Driving Range/Cart Storage

DeLaveaga Golf Course Proshop/Retail Shop

DeLaveaga Golf Course Driving Range Outdoor Bar

Websites (Accessed May 21, 2020)

DeLaveaga Golf & Lodge <http://www.delaveagagolf.com/>

DeLaveaga Golf Course - Reviews & Course Info
<https://www.golfnow.com/courses/1027324-delaveaga-golf-course-details>

Seascape & Aptos Golf Courses <https://www.seascapegc.com/>

Seascape Golf Club - Reviews & Course Info
<https://www.golfnow.com/courses/1027725-seascape-golf-club-details>

Visit Santa Cruz County <https://www.santacruz.org/>