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President & Chief Executive Officer

March 1, 2022

Assembly House & Community Development Committee
Assembly Member Buffy Wicks, Chair

Assembly Local Government Committee
Assembly Member Cecilia M. Aguiar-Curry, Chair

Re: AB 1910 [Conversion of Publicly-Owned Golf Courses to Affordable Housing]

Dear Members,

The staff of the National Golf Foundation (NGF)^[1] and our members in California have been following with interest proposals in the state assembly to convert municipal golf courses into sites for affordable housing.

While we appreciate the state's need for affordable housing, we wish to affirm, for the record, our unequivocal opposition to this bill and its potential to deprive ordinary Californians from accessing affordable public golf. We are especially concerned that this legislative initiative is based, at least in part, on inaccurate information about the profile, health and trajectory of the game and business of golf – both in general and in California – and that NGF's research is being misinterpreted and presented without proper context.

Demand for Golf

Golf is not in decline. More rounds of golf were played on U.S. courses in 2021 than at any point in history. In California, total rounds played at the state's golf courses increased 5.6% in 2020 (over 2019) and another 13.6% in 2021.^[2]

NGF research shows golf demand nationwide has been on the rise, with both the number and diversity of golfers having increased considerably over the past five years^[3]. Since 2019, the number of U.S. golf participants – counting those who played at on- and/or off-course venues^[4] – has increased by 10%. At golf courses, the strongest growth cohorts have been youth (+22% vs. 2019), Black (+18%), female (+11%) and Hispanic (+9%). In just the past year, NGF estimates 3.2 million people took up the sport for the first time – the most ever, including 37% female and 31% persons of color.

¹ The National Golf Foundation is a 501(c)6 not-for-profit trade organization founded in 1936 and considered to be the foremost authority of accurate and objective measures of golf's vitality.

² Source: Golf Datatech, LLC (in cooperation with NGF)

³ <https://www.ngf.org/participation-and-engagement-rise-again/>

⁴ On-course venues refer to golf courses; off-course venues include driving ranges, golf entertainment facilities (like Topgolf) and indoor golf simulators

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What's more, interest in playing the traditional game on a golf course continues to grow at an impressive rate. A decade ago, roughly 40% of Californians expressed at least some interest in playing, taking up or returning to the sport. Today, 51% do, equivalent to more than 18 million of the state's residents age 6-and-above. Also of note, the demographic profile of these 18 million+ Californians resembles the broader population, particularly in terms of gender and race-ethnicity.

Golf Course Supply and Accessibility

California is most certainly not over-supplied with municipal golf. The state has roughly 15,000 golfers per municipal golf facility. Nationally, that ratio is closer to 8,500-to-1. Given the strengthening demand for golf in recent years, this dynamic makes for long lines at many of California's municipal courses.

To the question of "Who can access golf courses," one must first understand that of the 14,033 total golf facilities across the U.S., three out of every four (74%) are open to the public. Similarly, 69% of facilities in California are currently available to everyone.

It's also important to know that interest and participation in golf extends well beyond affluent members of society. In fact, roughly a third of golfers nationwide come from households with incomes at or below the U.S. median. The assertion that golf "[does] not serve low and moderate-income [people]" is simply not supported by data.

In Summary

We urge the State Assembly to consider these facts and recognize the broad community and quality of life benefits that golf – municipal golf especially – provides to a diverse cross-section of California residents. These public-sector facilities represent important and affordable entry points to the sport, especially for lower-income citizens. Golfers often report that their first experience with the game came at a municipal course – a nod to the array of programming that takes place at these facilities, from youth camps and golf leagues to scholastic events and more.

We have great hope that the Assembly will preserve the economic, social and community benefits of municipal golf in California. Your state has some of the most magnificent and outstanding public golf courses in the nation, and thousands of Californians seek out these facilities for recreation and camaraderie each day. It would be a shame to see this resource diminished, especially if based on inaccurate information.

Sincerely,

