



michigan suburbs alliance

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NEW CONSERVANCY PROPOSES OPTIONS FOR RACKHAM

Providing Detroit Revenue, Protecting Regional Assets are Priorities

FERNDALE – With early pledges of more than \$6 million, a coalition of Detroiters and suburbanites is reaching out to Detroit City Council to reconsider their sale of Rackham Golf Course to a private developer, approved late last week. The sale of the property, originally a gift to Detroit from Horace and Mary Rackham, has generated controversy in the city of Huntington Woods where it is located and left Detroit parks and recreation activists wondering about the future of the city’s public spaces. The newly formed Rackham Conservancy hopes to bridge the growing divide between the communities by honoring the gift’s legacy but also providing a much-needed influx of cash to the City of Detroit.

“Detroit is not in an unusual position,” said Conan Smith, Executive Director of the Michigan Suburbs Alliance and one of the lead organizers of the Conservancy. “Cities across the region are looking to sell property to balance stressed budgets. This particular situation is unique because Rackham Golf Course is such an important regional asset – one that all of us have a duty to protect.”

Rackham Golf Course operates at a profit providing funding to support other Detroit recreational activities. The City proposed the sale of the golf course earlier this year based on an \$11.25 million dollar bid from Premium Golf, LLC, a private development firm seeking to build housing on the property. The Conservancy hopes to raise enough funding to make a comparable bid to the City of Detroit with the pledge to keep the property in public ownership.

The Rackham Conservancy includes Detroiters and suburbanites interested in regional collaboration as a tool to address emergent challenges such as this one. Ponsella Hardaway directs the Metropolitan Organizing Strategy Enabling Strength (MOSES), a coalition of southeast Michigan churches that see cooperation as the key to prosperity and equity.

“Rackham Golf Course really is a special place,” she said. “It is one of the few public courses operating on a region level, and it has a unique history of bringing southeast Michigan’s people

together. In the days of segregation, Rackham was Michigan's only integrated golf course – a demand the Rackhams made as a part of their gift to the people of Detroit.”

Her enthusiasm for the property's historic legacy is matched by recreation advocates who see Rackham Golf Course as an essential part of the region's sports network. Approximately 40 percent of Rackham golfers are Detroit residents.

“Rackham is still a place where beginners can play on a world-class course,” said Lisa Woodcox, Executive Director of The First Tee of Michigan Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to providing Detroit area youth the opportunity to learn the sport of golf and develop character and leadership skills in the process. “Hundreds of kids every year get their first opportunity to play golf, here, because this is a public course with a strong commitment to universal access.”

The Conservancy is supported by regional recreation leaders like ThinkDetroitPAL's Daniel S. Varner, Chief Executive Officer, and Geraldine Jackson, who represents Detroit on the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness, Health and Sports.

Residents, too, value the course for both its aesthetic value and for what it means to the region. Development on the property could threaten the environmental integrity of the neighboring Detroit Zoo and disrupt an important regional greenspace corridor.

Stephen Driker, M.D., who resides in Huntington Woods with his physician wife and children, said: “Rackham is more than just land; it's a legacy of unity that defies the divisions between race and class that we are still experiencing. Its loss would certainly be a symbolic blow – suggesting that we're giving up on addressing those challenges.”

Detroit City Council members who supported sale of the property have until Monday, November 27, at 4 PM to submit a request to reconsider the 5-4 vote. Conservancy members are hoping that the Thanksgiving break will give a few of them time to study the opportunity and return prepared to grapple with this important regional issue.

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