

July 1, 2024

Casey Trees Position Statement:
Rock Creek Golf Course Rehabilitation

Casey Trees has been engaged in a lengthy process, reviewing plans and information, both in the office and in the field, regarding the future renovation of Rock Creek Golf Course. We have tried our best and continue to maintain a balanced approach to this plan, knowing the importance of Rock Creek and the federal parks and their use to Washington, DC, for over 100 years – as well as their contribution to the District’s (and the region’s) rapidly decreasing green infrastructure.

Rock Creek Park is one of DC’s green gems, an oasis that not only provides recreational respite to residents and visitors around the region, but also an environmental buffer to the city’s extensive network of buildings and other heat and stormwater-exacerbating impervious surfaces. Along with many of the city’s other National Park Service properties, Rock Creek is also a cultural landmark. However, the golf course has suffered from decades of neglect and deferred maintenance. It arguably is also an under-utilized resource; one that can help DC’s residents increase their physical activity and enjoy all the benefits associated with greenspace, like community connection, mental wellness, climate resilience and environmental health.

The National Park Service is exploring a new model of park stewardship through a non-profit – the National Links Trust. This is a divergence from their traditional concessionaire structure which, undoubtedly, contributed to some of the issues the park is grappling with today. While it is not yet possible to know if this new model will be better than NPS’ traditional approach, what we do know is that the current model is not functioning as it should.

Casey Trees is a non-profit dedicated to restoring, enhancing, and protecting the tree canopy of the nation’s capital, and Rock Creek Park is a key piece of that tree canopy. In our work to attain that mission, the largest challenge we face is the increase in impervious surface – roadways, buildings, etc. – that DC is experiencing. Once soil is paved over, it traps more heat, increases stormwater runoff, and prevents trees from growing there for the foreseeable future. While the plans for Rock Creek do include increases in impervious surface for a driving range and clubhouse, the park will not be “developed” in the traditional sense – most of the land will remain green. Originally, National Links Trust proposed removing 8 acres of woodland, and has since decreased this to 6.2 acres while increasing their reforestation plans to 7.1 acres to offset this loss. Casey Trees is appreciative of these changes and hopes to see them completed in full and in a timely manner.

Given all the above, our observations and recommendations remain consistent, as follows. Casey Trees:

- Agrees that Rock Creek Golf Course has fallen to disrepair and is in need of funds to address deferred maintenance.
- Supports planning for the renovation of RCGC to increase use and engage communities of all kinds in active recreation.

- Strongly encourages NPS to limit the removal of healthy trees, in particular healthy trees that fit into the District’s definition of Special and Heritage Trees, even if it means reconfiguring greens and fairways to accommodate those trees.
- Asks NPS/NLT to provide a detailed reforestation plan to replant and maintain the proposed 7.1 acres of forest mitigation on-site, outlining tree size and species; and engage with a firm dedicated to woodland restoration and preservation in the formulation of the plan.
- Asks that NPS/NLT provides the community with a binding commitment to ensure that reforestation planning will be financially and legally supported and will be completed and maintained over the next 5-10 years.