

**Shrink the Links: Analyzing the Potential for
Repurposing Golf Courses in Los Angeles**

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All errors are of course my own.

Abstract

Los Angeles growth patterns and land use policies of the past have created a sprawling metropolis with very little space left to continue growing out from the city's urban core. This sprawl has led to a county-wide lack of developable land in areas that continue to grow in population and struggle with deficiencies in both housing and park land. Looking to creative solutions to that lack of developable land, I found the 91 golf courses within 20 miles of Los Angeles to present themselves for analysis. The vast amount of acreage that they cover cumulatively, with many of them existing very close to the urban core, provides space that could be developed to meet the needs of a constantly growing and changing Los Angeles. This research aims to find if golf courses in Los Angeles could be repurposed to be developed in a way that maximizes social benefit to the people of Los Angeles. This research utilizes expert interviews and mapped data to gather findings and create policy recommendations. Finding of this research showed that the repurposing and redevelopment of select golf courses in Los Angeles is a valid potential solution for the lack of developable land in Los Angeles. Findings also showed that the potential redevelopment should focus on meeting the dire need for affordable housing in Los Angeles while creating more accessible and versatile public park land. The findings support recommendations to create a Los Angeles taskforce of experts that will analyze golf courses in the area to select which courses are best suited for development, as well as legislation that eases the land use transition from golf course to a more socially beneficial development.

INTRODUCTION

“Golf is dying, many experts say,” (Gray, 2018). Pellucid Corp., a golf industry group, reported that from 2002 to 2016 the number of regular golfers fell from 30 to 20.9 million. Golf ratings are down, equipment sales are lagging, and the number of rounds played annually has fallen (Gray, 2018). The general decline in golf’s popularity means that many golf courses are struggling financially. This trend in the sport has seen over 800 golf courses around the United States close in the past decade (Clark, 2016). In response, some cities are making the decision to repurpose these golf courses, not only because player numbers are down, but also because golf courses use inordinate amounts of water and land resources, they are met with social and environmental criticism, and all without providing much community benefit to match that resource use.

In Los Angeles, there are nineteen golf courses within the city limits and another sixty-five within twenty miles of the city. To help solve issues of land scarcity for socially beneficial projects and land-misuse more generally, I examine and analyze how Los Angeles could repurpose golf courses to create more land for beneficial development.

In this project I aim to provide potential solutions to land scarcity in the city of Los

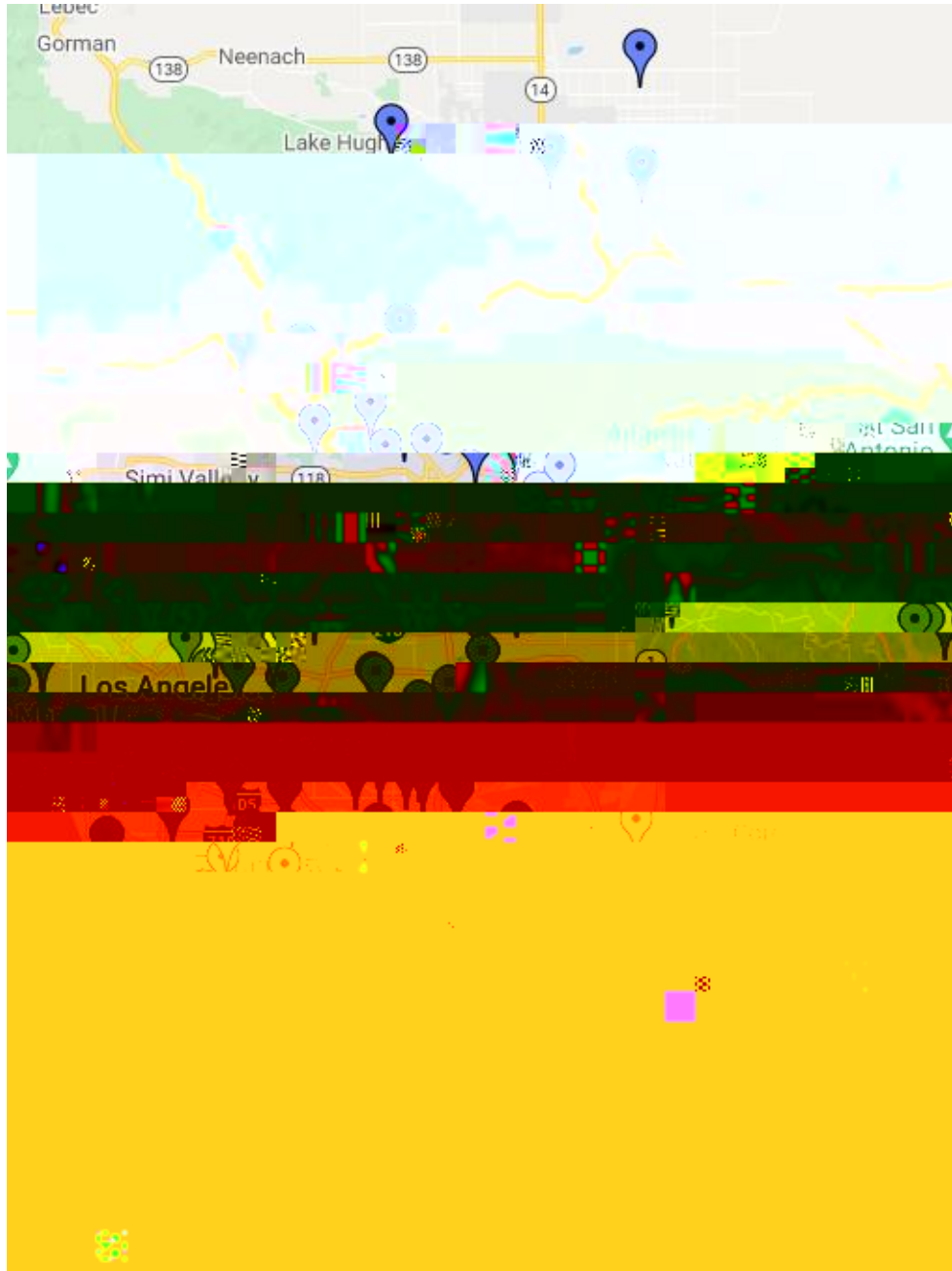


Fig. 1: A user generated Google Map of over 90 golf courses in and around Los Angeles

Through interviews with experts in Los Angeles politics, in housing and land-use research, in community organizing and housing justice, and in parks and recreation, supplemented by mapping of Los Angeles golf course, housing, parks, and transit data, my

Los Angeles Sprawl and Urban Growth

Los Angeles is one of the most sprawling cities in the world and continues to grow outward filling nearby valleys and hills with development. This “urban sprawl” is defined in a number of different ways such as the percentage of a metropolitan area’s population that resides within the Census Bureau-defined urbanized area (contiguous blocks generally having one thousand or more persons per square mile), or “land resources consumed to accommodate new urbanization,”

most by the young, elderly, and poor (Ewing, 1997). Thinking towards solutions, a research team from University of Southern California and the Brookings Institute are emphasizing the need for Los Angeles to “grow smarter,” and to think more critically about where growth is happening because sprawl cannot continue indefinitely (Dear, 2001). Additionally, the report claims that Los Angeles County “[does] not have enough developable land to accommodate expected growth in the next 20 years.” Those 20 years have elapsed since the study was conducted, and Los Angeles, with a continually growing population, still has a need for developable land in order to account for growing needs—especially housing (Dillon and Zahniser, 2022).

In Los Angeles, the growing regional core seems to have reached its natural barriers of mountains and sea that surround the city; thus, continued outward expansion is nearly impossible. The combination of sprawl and poor land-use have created a scarcity of land for new developments. Los Angeles can no longer grow outward but instead needs to find areas within the city that are close to resources and opportunities. Redevelopment of existing, built areas is much more disruptive and expensive than repurposing land that is “misallocated” to golf courses (Hein and Condon, 2019). Using potential development of housing or parks as an example, it is clear how building those within the city would decrease vehicle miles traveled, save people money on travel and transportation, reduce emissions, and lessen the distance to opportunity and community. In sum, there is clear evidence for need for land within Los Angeles. Research that advocates for smarter growth and minimizing Los Angeles sprawl supports repurposing of land and the redevelopment of golf courses are a possible solution to the shortage of developable land.

Land Use Change in Los Angeles

Zoning and land use regulations can be large factors in housing prices, as shown in C.J. Gabbe’s paper “Changing Residential Land Use Regulations to Address High Housing Prices,”

Urban Development points to two metrics to discuss L.A.'s supply shortage, vacancy rates and doubling up rates. The team of researchers shows that Los Angeles has the second lowest vacancy rate of any Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) (Zhu, et al, 2021). Additionally, Los Angeles proves to be the second highest MSA for doubling up rates, which, which is defined as "having one or more adults in addition to the head of household and spouse or partner" living in

benefits, environmental benefits, and increased access to the city for all people. Through the lens of TOD, when looking for or creating desirable land for beneficial development, it is important to consider the location of the space in relation to both the urban core, as well as nearby transit hubs.

This section of gathered research helps to inform the creation of a tool that will advise decisions concerning which Los Angeles golf courses could be most effectively repurposed as max-benefit development. As the TOD style has gained popularity among cities and developers, some areas have still been left out, such as South Central Los Angeles (Hess, 2004). Looking at Figure 1, it can be seen that there are two golf courses in South Central's Bell Gardens. There is Bell Gardens Golf Course and Rio Hondo Golf Club. By thinking about golf courses as an area for repurposing potential, it is also possible to use methods like TOD to make sure areas that need development might be able to receive it.

Public Opposition and Declining Interest of Golf

With these examples of community needs and examples of potential beneficial development, it is clear that land is needed in Los Angeles. Michael Dear claims that "Almost all the natural locations for urban development have been consumed, and most of the remaining areas are constrained by government policy" (Dear, 2001). Potentially, urban golf courses could

protecting public land, sustainability (water and energy consumption), and social issues with golf and course development. She ties many of these reactions to similar international sentiments and

hole American golf course used 448,123 kilowatt hours of electricity, 2,528 gallons of propane, 2,856 gallons of natural gas, 2,273 gallons of heating oil in a year, (Lyman et al, 2012). These three surveys illustrate the immense amount of resources that golf courses use. As a respondent to Helen Briassoulis's study put it "When human beings are facing global environmental crisis, there is no room on earth for a mere game," (Briassoulis, 2010).

These studies did not show specific responses from golf courses so water usage data from specific LA courses was not available here, but some data published by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. These water-use concerns are especially important in such a drought ridden area like Los Angeles. California laws protect individuals and certain businesses from releasing their exact water usage data, so it is difficult to know exactly how much water courses in Los Angeles use. A report from the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, though, showed how much water they saved by switching to recycled water at certain LA courses. The report showed that switching eight out of the city of LA's nineteen courses to recycled water would save 690 million gallons of water per year, giving an idea of the amount of water that one of the other 90 courses around LA might use individually (LADWP, 2018).

By virtue of their size and location, these urban golf courses today likely exist at significant social opportunity cost. Combined with their declining player numbers, immense resource use, and social dissatisfaction, they become very viable options to be repurposed and

155 of 222 studied public golf courses around the country lost a total of \$61 million. Within Los Angeles, the cities of Alhambra and Bell Gardens were both subjects of this research. Alhambra lost \$222,398 in 2020 while Bell Gardens lost \$139,678 (Joffe, 2022). Joffe also mentions how the financial information of Los Angeles golf courses are linked to the parks and recreation system, so not only are golf courses here losing money for themselves, but they are also losing money for the entire parks system of Los Angeles. If golf courses that are a net loss for the parks system could be identified and repurposed, the parks system could save money while simultaneously creating pathways for socially beneficial development on former golf courses

built is less important than making sure it gets built because people needing housing will likely move within the city to get it.

Patrick Condon pointed to his recommendations “to build one third market housing at full price and use the huge profits to build non-market housing like coops and social housing for low income.” Those huge profits would be from developing market-rate housing on the “free,” city-owned land of public golf courses.

Parks as a Community Need

In contrast to Pryzlucki, Cole, and Condon, Michael Shull was “not a proponent of developing those golf courses beyond what they are,” and felt that keeping them as golf courses would be the most socially beneficial thing to do. The parks and recreation director hailed their benefit as park land and reminded me that golf courses are zoned as open space in Los Angeles, just like parks. Figure 3 shows golf courses as well as open access parks in Los Angeles. The smallest green dots are any open access parks below 100 acres, then moving up in size the dots represent parks with areas greater than 100, 250, 400, and 500 acres. The map illustrates a disparity of park access in the urban core of Los Angeles and while golf courses offer open space to some, transitioning use could offer greater benefits to more people.

house. The kind of place where you go sit, toss a ball, lay out a blanket, have some community gatherings.” A golf course, while zoned as “open space,” as Michael Shull pointed out, would be low in this “hierarchy of parks.” It does not have the same benefit to the community as public open access parks do.

Course Size as a Repurposing Benefit

Having housing and public access parks on areas of more than fifty acres is doable. Patrick Condon, Bill Pryzlucki, and Rick Cole all talked about golf courses' large size as a reason why they are better repurposing targets than other areas of land, especially public land. From those discussions, I looked at the acreage of some of Los Angeles County's 90 courses. In this table, along with the acreage, is the distance to Downtown Los Angeles, as well as a count of the unhoused population in that golf course's Service Planning Area.

Figure 4: Course Acreage, Miles from City Center, and SPA Unhoused Population

Course Name	Acreage	Miles Driving from City Center	Unhoused Pop. by SPA (2020)
Chester Washington	135	12.8	4560
Hansen Dam	211	19.6	9108
Rio Hondo	145	12.7	4586
Woodley Lakes	295	19.6	9108
Bel Air Country Club	110	16.6	6009
Maggie Hathaway	20	10.1	13012
Whittier Narrows	356	10.9	4555
Wilshire Country Club	104	6.4	17121
Hillcrest	142	13.1	6009
Rancho Park	200	12.2	6009
Penmar	53	15.3	6009
Annandale	127	9.7	4555
Alhambra	150	9.3	4555
Los Amigos	153	14.1	9108
Oakmont	105	12	9108
Brookside	291	10.7	4555
Debell	140	14.1	9108
Alondra	214	16.1	4560

Access to Transit Keeps Potential Developments Connected

Patrick Condon highlighted the potential benefit of repurposing golf courses that are particularly close to “transit, schools, and other amenities.” From preliminary background research on transit-oriented development and from what I was told by Patrick Condon, transit stops are something to look for nearby development areas that would increase their desirability as a development site.

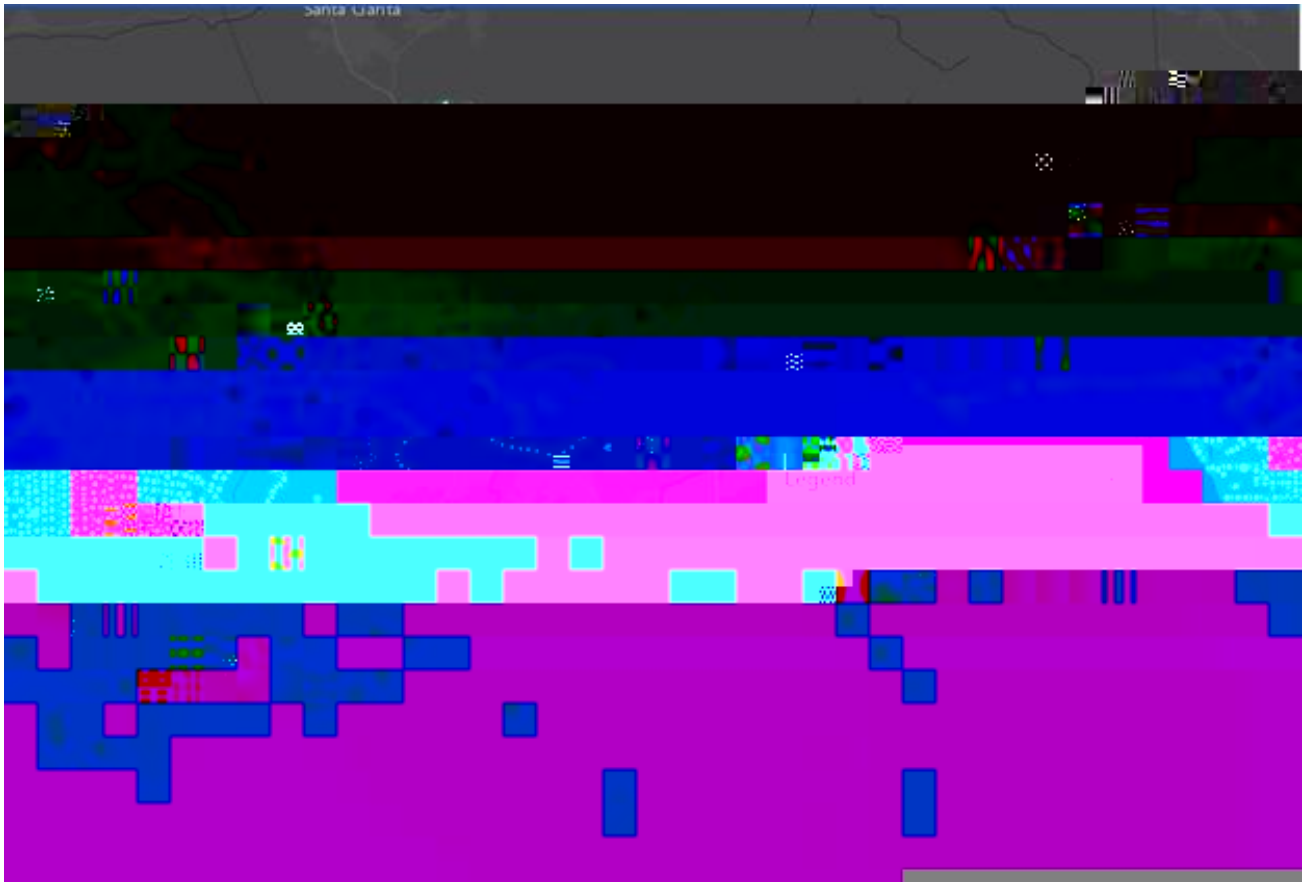


Figure 5: Golf Courses and Transit Stops

Figure 5 shows all golf courses within Los Angeles County (private courses in red, municipal courses in yellow, and public option courses in orange) as well as all transit stops as of 2018. Most of the golf courses closer to the city center tend to be public courses. There are also more transit stops closer to the city center so using the Transit Oriented Development metric, the most

space can happen without altering the city charter. The Los Angeles Board of Supervisors, who can initiate changes to zoning codes (How to Request a Zone Change, n.d.), voted to approve development of a struggling golf course in Carson (Evains, 2020), without changing the city charter. While having a charter for Los Angeles might make the zoning changes or development of golf courses more difficult than other cities, it is still completely possible and should not be written off as too challenging.

In the next section I offer some ideas for addressing these and other challenges. Focusing on providing new affordable housing developments, I suggest how a task force could look at the

have done so in this project, evaluating what makes a golf course appropriate to repurpose. This committee would be made up of experts on housing, land use, and Los Angeles politicians, similar to the people I interviewed. To ensure a complete analysis through different lenses and with different views, it would be necessary to have individuals from different career backgrounds look at several logistical methods for actually making the zoning changes as well as

Community Organizations

- What kinds of community needs do you think could be addressed with the redevelopment of golf courses?
- How is the lack of housing in LA a land use issue?
- Why would golf courses be a good space for repurposing?
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