

Golf Courses Emerge as a Fix for L.A.'s Affordable Housing Crisis

A Los Angeles architect argues that the solution to the city's housing woes might lie on the 18th green. Urban golfers don't agree.

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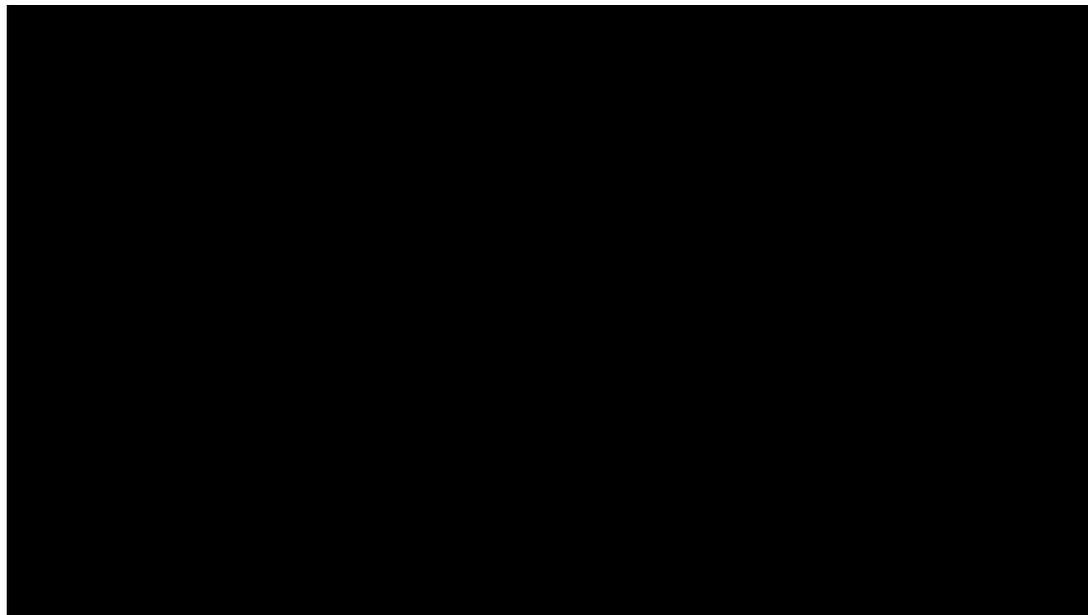


Housing-starved Los Angeles maintains the largest municipal golf system in the United States. Should some of that land be used for something else? *Photographer: Patrick T. Fallon/Bloomberg*

The Rancho Park Golf Course is an 18-hole, par 71 municipal course in the affluent West L.A. neighborhood of Cheviot Hills, near Century City. The greens used to be the domain of a private club, but became part of a Los Angeles city park after World War II. It's the former home of the PGA's Los Angeles Open, and site of a handful of memorable golf milestones, including, in 1969,

the second tour victory for Charlie Siffords, the first African-American pro to play on the PGA tour.

“It’s a really pretty park,” says Dermot Connell, an L.A. golfer who is very involved in the city’s municipal circuit and serves as a Rancho Park board member. “From almost every point at Rancho, you can get a perspective of the city. It’s unique in the sense that you’re in the middle of a major metropolitan area – yet there you are, walking along a tree line in a little oasis of solitude.”



However, the course looks a little different to Daniel Dunham, a designer at the Santa Monica-based Koning Eizenberg Architecture firm. To him, Rancho Park would be an ideal spot to build affordable housing.

Dunham estimates that one could fit 15,000 units – homes for about 50,000 people – on the 200-acre site, which is also within walking distance of both an upcoming Purple Line extension and a station on the Expo subway line. And Rancho is just one of the 19 courses available to L.A. duffers – the city operates the largest public golf system in the United States.

Dunham assembled this back-of-the-napkin estimate to illustrate just how much real estate is locked up in the game, even as Los Angeles continues to struggle with an affordable housing crisis. Current L.A. housing prices are averaged at 7.3 times higher than the median income, and racial disparities mean that nearly 40% of Black residents spend half their income on rent. The coronavirus is exacerbating the crisis further: In May, economists were warning of a 20% homelessness spike in L.A. alone.

But in Los Angeles, as in so many other cities, efforts to build more housing often face community resistance – a phenomenon that Dunham often sees from his perspective as a designer of multifamily housing projects. Back in 2017, Dunham worked on a five-story affordable housing development in Santa Monica that faced community backlash and concerns from residents about low-income renters bringing crime to the neighborhood. Still, the development has been in operation since 2018, housing people with an income between 30% and 60% of the area median income.

“People tend to be very supportive of affordable housing policy in L.A., but the thing that people tend to oppose is the project itself,” says Dunham. “Once they see the proposal and that it’s a big building in their neighborhood, then suddenly it’s not good enough or not right for the neighborhood.”

Efforts to build thousands of units of new housing for the city’s soaring homeless population – a goal of the 2016 bond measure Proposition HHH – have fallen far short, in part because of community resistance, litigation delays, and stratospheric construction costs. The latest audit from the city controller revealed that the average cost to build a single unit stood at \$531,000, as the Los Angeles Times recently reported, and only a small fraction of the anticipated projects have been completed.

The clear solution, according to Dunham, is to tap L.A.’s vast reservoir of municipal golf courses. He picked Rancho Park because of its strategic location and size. “The site is so huge, you could build a factory there, build the units on site, and crane them into place,” he says. “If you can get something like 15,000 units in one place, then it opens up a lot of opportunities for innovation and efficiency.”

Just playing the Dunham’s numbers game, a residential development in Rancho Park could accommodate most of L.A.’s nearly 60,000 homeless.



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“It’s just such a huge use of land that I find it’s pretty inexcusable in dense urban areas,” Dunham says.

He runs a few numbers: Urban golf courses take up about 120 acres of land each, on average. That’s about 2,300 acres of land occupied by courses within the city of L.A. alone. But there are another 68 golf courses – 12 public, 20 private, and 36 municipal – within 20 miles of Los Angeles, the course directory Golf Link says, bringing the total courses in the area to 87. Tally it all up and Greater L.A. is devoting more than 10,000 acres to the game of golf.

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With its central location and good transit access, Rancho Park Golf Course in West L.A. might be a good candidate for housing-focused redevelopment. But the course's players don't agree. *Photographer: Bryan Chan/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images*

The idea isn't new. As the popularity of the sport fades (between 2002 and 2016, the number of players in the U.S. dropped by about 10 million people), proposals to redevelop the hundreds of shuttered and underutilized links are multiplying nationwide, and around the world. More than 200 golf courses closed in 2017 alone, according to the National Golf Foundation – a trend that some environmentalists celebrate, and that developers have tried to capitalize upon. Denver wrestled with a 2017 proposal to turn a 155-acre golf course into affordable housing units. In Kansas City, the local planning commission voted to approve a \$105 million development on a vacant municipal course. New Jersey's Joint Planning Board approved 249 new dwellings on a portion of a 160-acre suburban course. And in Pennsylvania, a housing developer attempted to build 336 new family townhouses on part of a failing course's plot of land.

In all of these cases, however, the proposals were met with fierce resistance, as residents objected to potential traffic increases and loss of green space. Should Los Angeles try to repurpose any of its public courses, the opposition would be no less engaged, local players say.

Connell, for example, is not thrilled by Dunham's idea to build affordable housing units on the land now occupied by Rancho Park. "While recognizing that the homeless issue is real and that it's a very big burden on the city of Los Angeles, I'd be personally very disappointed if they somehow managed to build on Rancho Park, or any of the city courses I play, for that matter," he

says. Losing the course would remove a valuable community social center, and he predicted that nearby residents would wrap any such plan up in years-long fights for approval.

“I’m glad that people are thinking about ways to solve that problem,” Connell says. “I would love it if they came up with other solutions other than knocking down Rancho Park. I just don’t think it’s practical.”

Marc Dauber, another club member, also reacted strongly to the idea of redeveloping his local greens. Municipal courses like Rancho Park represent an affordable option for less-affluent golfers. “In order to join a private club in West Los Angeles, the cost is no less than an initiation fee of \$225,000 with monthly dues of probably \$1,500 a month.” he says. “That obviously prices out a few people.”

In comparison, a weekend round at Rancho is \$45.50, although Dauber admits that it's not as well kept as some of the private clubs.

Cost isn’t the only difference between country clubs and municipal golf. In this predominantly white sport, public city courses tend to be enclaves of relative racial and gender diversity, as a member of the City Park Players Club in Denver told the *Denver Post* in 2015. And they gained new value as safe sites for outdoor recreation during the coronavirus pandemic, which has at least temporarily delivered a surge of popularity to the pastime.

When Dunham’s housing unit estimate was brought up to Dauber, he told me his instant reaction was to present his middle finger, and then suggested finding other solutions.

“I would use the course acreage as a last resort,” he says. “I think there are other opportunities where they could find space. I’d also say that the land is worth so much, that I just can’t see that being used for affordable housing. I’d rather see them go higher density in different places.”



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But Dunham points to the fact that building housing just anywhere won’t solve the problem.

“You know, L.A. has a lot of low-density areas that are really close to these trains,” he says.

“We’re building these new lines that are hideously expensive, so you should want to be efficient with that money. It’s counterproductive not to put housing and offices adjacent to those lines.”

Dunham is not suggesting that redeveloping a golf course is going to be easy, even in a city that has 19 of them. But to him, the objections that the golfing community raised sound all too familiar.

“Sure, neighbors will sue. They’re going to say that it changes traffic, that it affects property value. They’ll do whatever they can,” he says. “And these kinds of people are very good at appropriating language of social justice movements, and they’ll claim that this is gentrification, or that this is displacement, which are real problems – just not so much in Cheviot Hills.”

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