

Written Submission on the Pilot Disc Golf Project

Richmond Hill Council | Item 15.2.11 | Staff Report SRPBS.26.055

Submitted by	Sigmund Lee, Richmond Hill resident
Council item	15.2.11, Request for Information, Pilot Disc Golf Project
Request	Receive clause (a), but defer or reject clause (b) pending a defined location, clear scope, public consultation and complete lifecycle costing

Mayor and Members of Council:

I respectfully ask Council to receive Staff Report SRPBS.26.055 under clause (a), but defer or reject clause (b). Council is being asked to allocate \$35,000 from the Cash-in-Lieu of Parkland Reserve Fund for a pilot disc golf course at an unidentified park, other than Ada Mackenzie Park, between 2027 and 2032. That funding should not be approved until Council has a defined location, a clear and consistent project scope, meaningful public consultation and a complete lifecycle cost.

This is not an objection to disc golf. It is a request that Council define what it intends to build, determine its full cost and understand what other priorities may be displaced before committing public funds.

Basis of this submission

I reviewed the original member motion, the April 1 and September 9, 2026 meeting recordings and public YouTube transcripts, Staff Report SRPBS.26.055, and the recommendations now before Council.

Timestamps are provided so the quoted passages can be checked against the public recordings. Automatic transcripts may contain minor transcription errors, but the contrast in the recorded statements is clear.

The project changed after staff completed the report

When Councillor Thompson introduced his motion on April 1, he called it “fairly straightforward” and described it as “an additional recreational opportunity for our residents.” He emphasized seasonal or temporary installations that could test a recreational use without permanent infrastructure or long-term commitments.

“The focus is on underutilized park spaces. That was my main focus here.”

April 1, 2026 Committee of the Whole recording, approximately 1:11:24

The written motion included general references to environmental stewardship and environmental considerations. However, neither the specific Council direction nor Councillor Thompson's April presentation identified forest reclamation, invasive-species removal, native planting, ecological restoration or environmental education as defined project objectives.

On September 9, after the staff report was presented, Councillor Thompson described a substantially broader initiative:

“What if we could reclaim forested areas overtaken by invasive species, restore them with native trees and plants, create opportunities for environmental education and at the same time introduce low impact recreation?”

September 9, 2026 Committee of the Whole recording, approximately 1:04

He said this was “where I was really trying to go” and later described recreational, environmental, ecological-restoration and stewardship objectives. When he asked whether reclaiming forested areas affected by invasive species had been used as an assessment criterion, staff answered that it had not.

Council should therefore clarify which project it is considering:

- A recreational disc golf pilot in an underutilized park space; or
- A broader ecological-restoration initiative incorporating disc golf, invasive-species removal, native planting and environmental education.

These are materially different projects. They require different expertise, locations, consultation, timelines and budgets. Council should not approve funding based on an answer to the original question when the project is now being described as something materially different.

Staff followed the direction they understood

Clear objectives should precede staff direction. When a project's scope is not clearly defined at the outset, staff may spend time and public resources answering the wrong question. If the project is later described as something materially different, completed work may have to be repeated, expanded or replaced.

Staff advised Council that they had been under the impression the pilot needed to be implemented sooner. They were therefore expected to advance the initiative quickly, based on the scope Council originally gave them. Acting on that direction, staff researched a recreational pilot through municipal benchmarking, site reviews and preparation of the report. That understanding also influenced their site assessment. Staff explained that Phyllis Rawlinson Park would require more extensive work because of its natural setting, invasive species, ecological-restoration needs, site constraints, timing and cost.

Urgency cannot substitute for clear direction. When Council requests expedited work without first defining the project's objectives, location and complete scope, it creates a risk of incomplete analysis, duplicated staff effort and additional public expense. Staff should not be criticized for failing to examine matters that were not clearly included in the direction they received.

After the report was completed, the proposal was described as a broader ecological-restoration initiative. This change may require duplicated analysis, additional staff work and delays to other City priorities. The concern is not with staff's work. Staff answered the question Council asked. The concern is that Council's direction did not clearly describe the project that was later claimed to have been intended.

The amended recommendation is no longer supported by a location specific analysis

Staff recommended Ada Mackenzie Park after assessing 23 parks, narrowing the list to four locations and completing site visits. Committee removed Ada Mackenzie Park but retained the \$35,000 allocation for “a park, other than Ada Mackenzie Park.” Council is therefore being asked to approve funding before the replacement location is known.

Without a defined location, Council does not have location-specific information regarding:

- site preparation, vegetation clearing, grading and accessibility;
- environmental, ecological and legal restrictions;
- neighbourhood parking, safety and competing park uses;
- design, installation and ongoing maintenance requirements;
- public and neighbourhood consultation; and
- removal, restoration and end-of-pilot obligations.

A budget developed for the scope and location assessed by staff should not automatically be transferred to an unidentified park with potentially different constraints and costs.

The complete financial commitment is unknown

The \$35,000 estimate was based on recent disc golf installations in Toronto and Whitchurch-Stouffville, adjusted for inflation and a small contingency. It does not provide a complete estimate for the broader ecological-restoration concept described on September 9.

Before approving funding, Council should receive the following:

- a location-specific capital estimate;
- annual operating, maintenance and monitoring costs for 2027 to 2032;
- the cost of ecological assessment, invasive-species removal, native planting and environmental education, if these remain part of the project;
- removal and site-restoration costs at the end of the pilot;
- the proposed source of continuing operating funds; and
- the parkland or recreational priorities that may be delayed or displaced.

If disc golf is incorporated into a broader ecological-restoration project, the City should separately identify all costs attributable to disc golf and all costs attributable to restoration. Combining the two components should not obscure the complete cost of either initiative.

Using the Cash-in-Lieu of Parkland Reserve Fund does not make the project free. Every withdrawal reduces the funds available for other parkland needs, and continuing maintenance may affect future operating budgets. This deserves particular attention when the City's Financial Master Plan indicates that annual property-tax increases in the range of 6 to 7 percent may be required under its long-range financial projections.

Staff time and opportunity cost must be recognized

Staff time has a cost even when it is absorbed within an existing departmental budget. Referring this matter back under a substantially expanded scope may duplicate work already completed and delay other approved priorities.

Before directing further work, Council should be advised of:

- the staff time and internal cost already devoted to this initiative;
- the additional staff and consultant resources required for the expanded scope;
- which approved projects or priorities may be delayed; and
- whether further study is justified relative to other community needs.

City staff have important existing responsibilities. Their time should be directed by clear objectives and established priorities, not spent repeating work because a project's intended purpose changes after the original report is completed.

The financial concern originated in resident correspondence

During the April discussion, Councillor Thompson acknowledged that a resident's written submission had raised concerns about financial commitments. He then asked staff to confirm that those concerns would form part of the report. The official agenda record confirms that I was the resident who submitted that correspondence.

On September 9, Councillor Thompson said Council should be "asking the right questions." Yet the record shows that the financial concern originated in resident correspondence, while members raised consultation, parking, urgency and competing priorities. Those questions should have been answered before funding was advanced.

Public consultation must precede a location and funding decision

Several members expressed concern about the absence of public consultation, neighbourhood parking, competing recreational priorities and the urgency of approving funding before the end of the Council term. Those concerns become more significant now that the recommended location has been removed. Residents near any proposed location should be consulted before Council commits funding or directs implementation. Relevant recreational and environmental organizations should also be consulted if Council intends to pursue a combined recreation and ecological-restoration project.

Request to Council

I respectfully ask Council to receive the report under clause (a), but defer or reject clause (b) until:

- Council clearly defines the project's objectives and scope;
- a suitable location is identified and evaluated against those objectives;
- meaningful public and neighbourhood consultation is completed;
- staff provides complete capital, operating and lifecycle costs;
- disc golf and ecological-restoration costs are separately identified;
- environmental, legal, safety and liability issues are resolved; and
- the proposal is compared with other parkland and recreational priorities.

The question is not whether disc golf can be an enjoyable activity. The question is whether Council knows what it is approving, where it will be located, what it will cost over its complete life, what staff work it will require and what other priorities may be displaced.

With substantial long-term financial pressures facing Richmond Hill, reserve funding should not be treated as an alternative to financial scrutiny. Moving a cost to a reserve changes the source of payment. It does not make the cost disappear.

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Documents and recordings reviewed

Member Motion, Exploring Disc Golf Opportunities in Richmond Hill Parks, April 1, 2026; Committee of the Whole meeting recording and public YouTube transcript, April 1, 2026; Staff Report SRPBS.26.055, September 9, 2026; Committee of the Whole meeting recording and public YouTube transcript, September 9, 2026; Richmond Hill Council agenda Items 15.2.11 and 15.2.19.