Disc golf’s “pole hole” is made to catch a flying disc.
Disc golf, with its flying discs and holes that are closer to the sky than the ground, may not be quite what you think it is. And if you’re not careful, the sport may just hit you in the head before your facility is ready to handle it.

The sport of disc golf is growing quickly. In fact, disc manufacturers estimate incredible growth in the next few years for the unique sport of disc golf, which tasks players with landing a disc into a person-sized basket on a pole, or “hole.” Harold Duvall, part owner of Innova Champion, a disc manufacturer says, “We’ve seen steady annual growth in the neighborhood of 15 percent over the past 20 years and expect that yearly growth to continue for the next 20. At this rate, communities and regions with existing courses will need roughly twice their current disc golf capacity in just five to seven years and many communities haven’t yet started.” Duvall’s observation begs the question: are park and recreation facilities ready for the jump in disc golf popularity?

**Course Development and Increased Play**

Disc golf, sometimes referred to as Frisbee® golf, is played like regular golf except that a disc is thrown in place of using a club to hit a ball. Players start from each tee and make sequential throws playing their next throw from their previous lie like golf until holing out into a metal basket. The player taking the least number of throws after 9 or 18 holes is the winner.

Players carry a bag of discs with different flight characteristics that typically includes several for driving, approaching and putting. The sport officially became disc golf in the 1970s following the invention of the basket by founder Steady Ed Headrick. He watched players informally making up their own games by using objects like trees, light poles and fire hydrants as targets.

A nine-hole recreational disc golf course requires a minimum of five acres and a championship course requires upwards of 30 acres. To support this growth, park and recreation managers will need to find public property where disc golf players can be free to throw and toss. They should also look at the viability of developing private facilities rather than public courses that are the standard in most communities.

For example, the metro area of the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minn., has been a hotbed of disc golf activity. There are currently 30 courses within a half-hour drive of the interstate that loops around the cities. More than half of the suburbs either have public courses or have determined they don’t currently have suitable property for one.

There are a number of ways for park and recreation departments to deal positively with growth, and even produce income to more than justify the creation of one. If you don’t have disc golf in your community yet, you may discover ways to economically justify and fund a new course.

One of the most straightforward—but not necessarily the easy ways to generate funds for a new course—is to collect sponsorship for the basket.
For existing courses, one effective way to beautify and maintain holes is to develop an “Adopt-a-hole” program. Usually private parties will adopt a hole and work to upkeep landscaping, add benches and perform periodic clean up.

The local disc golf club can be an excellent source for course help. At a minimum, many of the higher level players in the area are known to occasionally carry plastic bags for course cleanup in their recreational rounds. If you don’t yet have a disc golf club and you have avid disc golf players, it may be to your benefit to advocate for the formation of one.

Creative Income Sources
Perhaps it is time to consider ways to generate some income from the disc golfers to help defray general maintenance expenses. Charging a fee for each round is not the only way. Another way is to sell discs and other items at a park location where you already have staffing. For example, an indoor swimming facility near a course outside of Washington, D.C., has annually sold about $12,000 in discs for several years.

Not very many sites have established infrastructure onsite from which to generate income. But if you can, it can pay off handsomely. The Three Rivers Park District that manages the Hyland Ski & Snowboard Area (HSSA) in Bloomington, Minn., has been surprised and pleased with the income they’ve generated from greens fees and discs sales by using their ski areas as disc golf courses in the off-season. Despite a short first season, the money they made was substantial. The district managed a golf driving range on the ski hill in the summer so their infrastructure and staffing were actively in place. Placing disc golf courses on ski hills for alternate season use is a fast growing and surprisingly successful phenomenon.

Contract Services
If the community facilities don’t have a place to sell discs or the headquarters location is too far away for players to stop by casually, park and recreation departments can consider opening a contract for bid to local disc entrepreneurs. This model continues to work well in central Texas. A local vendor pulls a trailer by truck into the park each day, selling discs and snacks under contract with the city, resulting in a financially viable business.

The largest disc golf contract operation is currently the Morley Field course in San Diego, Calif. Snapper Pierson has had a contract with the city to build, manage and run the disc golf course since the late 1980s. Considering this course has almost had monopoly standing since then, let alone year-round great weather, it should be no surprise how well Pierson and the city are doing. The city receives a substantial cut of the six-figure income the course generates. Morley Field generates revenues from greens fees, disc, apparel

Resources for Disc Golf Course Developers

To read about the latest disc golf installation trends: www.innovadiscs.com/coursedesign/index.htm

For general information or for additional help on finding a qualified designer in your area or determining whether someone has the necessary skills for your project, visit the PDGA Web site: www.pdga.com.

To learn more about the PDGA U.S. Mid-Nationals Disc Golf Championships: www.midnationals.com.

For information about the sport, visit the Disc Golf Association: www.discgolfassoc.com.
and snack sales plus disc rentals.

Pierson says, “This year we plan on moving and expanding our shop to near hole 1 and turning our present shop into a ‘19th hole’ snack shop restaurant. This should allow us to double our current revenue stream over the next several years and help generate even more money for the cash-strapped city. Making this section of the park the most beautiful enhances property values of nearby homeowners and generates more than $50,000 for the city coffers each year.”

If staff doesn’t want to deal with merchandise sales, perhaps charging for greens fees seems appropriate. One efficient way is to use an unattended honor kiosk with pay envelopes and a lock box where random spot checks by a ranger or summer staff are all that’s needed. That’s worked well for Dane County’s Vallarta-Ast Disc golf Course at Token Creek near Madison, Wis. Permanent and seasonal staff manages five shelters, campgrounds, dog exercise area and several trails in addition to monitoring the disc golf course.

County Parks Director Darren Marsh states, “The key to the success and popularity of our pay course is having a high quality facility designed by professionals that’s well maintained. We’re attracting golfers from all over the Midwest. Our revenues cover all of our maintenance expenses and more, allowing for continued course improvements,” says Marsh. The county plans to expand the existing course by nine holes and add future courses.

**Tournament Courses**

If the course is the right size, there’s an opportunity to gain revenue by hosting tournaments in addition to local leagues. While these events will likely generate more expenses for the park and recreation budget, off-setting these expenses can be as simple as charging fees to reserve the course, shelter or toilet facilities. In many cases, loyal disc golf volunteers and clubs can help run these events with little or no compensation.

To find out if a course is capable of handling tournaments, park and recreation managers will need to consult a Professional Disc Golf Association (PDGA) rating system to assess the quality. Current course ratings are available online at www.pdga.com/course/eval/index.php. The process is still in its initial phase with only about 100 courses evaluated.

While the primary intent for the ratings is to help players determine which courses they might want to play in their local area or when traveling, the next step will be for these evaluations to determine which courses are suitable for hosting events at all levels, including major championships. Convention and visitors’ bureaus are actively pursuing large sporting events for their areas. If a community is considering building a course for tournament use, using a qualified course designer will go a long way toward achieving a safe and successful course, a good evaluation and increasing the potential for hosting higher level events. The Disc Golf Course Designer (DGCD) group has more than 100 members dedicated to pursuing excellence in course design. All members are dedicated to doing a good job and have knowledge of the sport.

**Major Event Hosting**

Lest you think a large metro area is required for major events, consider that Rock Hill, S.C., Peoria, Ill., and Augusta, Ga., were hosts of major events in 2006 with past hosts including Rochester, N.Y. and Flagstaff, Ariz. In 2007, the Pro World Championships will be held in the small town of Highbridge, Wisc., which has a population of 42.

So, is the timing right for park and recreation departments to make some money on disc golf? Maybe. Is it time your park and recreation department looked into some of these ideas? Perhaps. Talk to a park and recreation department with a disc golf course—chances are, they think the facility is a real hole-in-one.