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APPROACH SHOTS

A WALK IN THE PARK

IN THE REINCARNATION OF TRADITION GOLF CLUB, GOLF WILL BE AN AMENITY THAT'S SEEN RATHER THAN PLAYED

—By David Gould—

THE BUNKERS LAID OUT BY COURSE ARCHITECT GENE BATES WILL BE SHAPED, BUT THEY WON'T HAVE SAND IN THEM. Greensites will look the way the architect designed them, yet they won't have modern drainage layers and they'll be grassed with unputtable bahia. And the eight-foot golf cart paths Bates specified will most likely be widened so that roller-bladers can scoot safely past baby strollers.

In the odd but imaginative master plan for Royal Palm Beach Village Commons, there will be what looks like a golf course—but no golf will be played on it. Not at first, and possibly never.

Although course closures are common nowadays, there's something quite uncommon about the re-development of the former Tradition Golf Club in south Florida. For starters, a municipality (the Village of Royal Palm Beach) purchased the property; most defunct courses are taken over by land developers. What's more, the former course's 163-acre parcel isn't being flipped to sell land; instead, it's being overhauled to improve the lifestyle offerings for residents. The new site will include a look-but-don't-play nine-hole layout, as well as a great lawn, picnic pavilions,



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a wedding garden and space for facilities like an arts center and a horticultural park.

"Our course will have nice fairways, but people will use them as walking trails instead of playing golf on them," explains Ray Liggins, engineer and assistant manager of the municipality. "At some point, we may go in and finish it off so it's a real course that golfers can play."

Royal Palm Beach, a middle-class enclave amid the riches of Palm Beach County, paid \$4.5 million for the acreage after its owner shut down his golf operation in August 2004. Centrally located amid residential streets, the Tradition course had, since 1954, enhanced the property values of surrounding homes and generally beautified the area.

"We wanted to restore those property values and keep the overall aesthetic benefit," says Liggins, "so we included golf in our redevelopment plan—60 acres for a regulation nine-hole course and 100 or so acres for other forms of recreation." In stepped Bates, who created a design that Liggins calls "wonderful."

So, you may ask, if that design is so "wonderful," then why isn't it being constructed to accommodate actual play? The answer is one that most any course operator would be pleased to hear. Seems the owner of Village Golf Club, a daily fee facility located nearby, objected to the prospect of public-financed competition coming in—and the municipality heeded his concerns.

"The owner had just redone his greens and renovated his clubhouse," Liggins says. "He did a very nice job of it, and after such a major investment, he was very concerned about losing play. The last thing we need is another golf course to go under, so we honored his request."

Circumstances favored the town's takeover of Tradition Golf Club, regardless of its plans for the course. Being centrally located rather than out in the sticks, the property is highly accessible to recreation-minded citizens. And while the course was never known for its profitability, it was free of mortgage debt and, thus, easier to sell for a price Royal Palm Beach could afford.

"If the owner was highly leveraged, we probably couldn't have done this," Liggins says. Further aiding the cause was a cash windfall the village received through the sale of its water utility to Palm Beach County.

Even so, some taxpayers scoffed at parting with \$4.5 million in public funds rather than letting a developer take over the land. "People said we should have squeezed him by enforcing code or whatever, but we wanted to make this a fair deal for both sides," says Liggins, who admits the property was drifting into code violations due to neglected upkeep.

Once in possession of the land, the village undertook some necessary environmental work. The task Liggins knew about—arsenic remediation related to pesticide use—proved fairly manageable. It was the devil he didn't know, in the form of asbestos-cement irrigation pipe, that dinged his budget.

"The course had a perfectly functioning PVC irrigation system," Liggins says. "Un-

derneath that was our little surprise—abandoned asbestos-cement lines." Removal of the ancient pipe came to \$300,000.

"That's a word to the wise, if you're a municipality and you're converting a longstanding golf property to another use," he notes. "Be prepared for some environmental cleanup costs."

Now that the cleanup is done and plans are moving forward, most residents have recognized the potential long-term benefits for the village. But Liggins, a golfer himself, can't help but wince at the thought of no foursomes cavorting on the Village Commons property. Not surprisingly, he's got a few ideas to address that issue.

In its current form, the master plan calls for a golf learning and practice facility to be tucked in one corner, with space for an 18-hole grass putting course. The proposed site is level, clean, properly sized and separated by a berm from the rest of the park.

"Maybe when people get out there and see the space they'll voice their support for operating it as a range," Liggins says. "That would put a nice golf presence into the facility."

As for the nine holes he will soon begin building, Liggins has been considering an alternate form of the royal and ancient game as part of its future. "I looked into disc golf as a possible activity," he confesses. "I'm pretty sure walkers and Frisbee golfers can coexist on the same fairways."

David Gould is a Connecticut-based freelance writer and frequent contributor to Golf Business.

A WORTHY FIGHT

SCRATCHING FOR ROUNDS IN A MARKET WITH 57 COURSES IN A 15-MILE RADIUS, Dan Pesant was relieved when neighboring Tradition Golf Club ceased operations and sold out to Royal Palm Beach Village. But when the municipality announced plans to build a new course and high-end range on the old Tradition property, Pesant, owner of Village Golf Club, felt he had to fight city hall.

"We pay \$97,000 a year in taxes," he says. "I knew they didn't want those revenues to go away."

Armed with this knowledge, Pesant approached each council person and told them that the course the village was planning to build would decrease his business by 20 percent. Less revenue coming in would mean less taxes going out. "And if they went ahead with a state-of-the-art range facility, that would have killed us," he adds.

Pesant, who has owned his course since 2002 and had just completed major renovations to his greens and clubhouse, had an interesting alternative for Royal Palm Beach to consider. "I asked them, 'Why don't you just buy us out? Then you can be in the golf business and have one less competitor.'" They passed.

When Pesant got word that the village was bringing in a National Golf Foundation staff consultant to assess the master plan, he pressed his point harder. "I was nervous about the NGF guy," Pesant recalls. "But he was honest. He gave an accurate picture of how the business has been going. I think that woke them up." —D.G.