

Finding New Uses For Troubled Golf Courses

by GREG ALLEN

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Dozens of golf courses have closed in Florida in recent years, leaving communities with a dilemma: what to do with the vacant land? Some have been turned into parks, some have been developed and some towns have begun operating the courses themselves.

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RENEE MONTAGNE, host:

The rough economy has put many golf courses in, well, you might say the rough. Nationwide, there are too few golfers and too many courses. That's led to a shakeout in the industry. There more golf courses closing than are opening. Dozens have shut down in Florida, the state with the most golf courses.

As NPR's Greg Allen reports from Miami, some Florida communities see this as an opportunity.

(Soundbite of golf swing)

GREG ALLEN: It's as much a part of Florida as beaches and palm trees. According to the University of Florida, golfing adds more than \$6 billion annually to the state's economy. But here, as in California, Arizona, Georgia and other Sunbelt states, many golf courses are closing.

(Soundbite of golf swing)

Greg Nathan with the National Golf Foundation says the reason is simple.

Mr. GREG NATHAN (National Golf Foundation): Every industry is affected by the supply and demand. We had a situation with more supply than we had demand.

ALLEN: Some of it has to do with the recession. With less disposable income, golfers are playing fewer rounds. Meanwhile, Nathan says, over the last two decades, the number of golf courses has increased by nearly a third. Many of those courses were built as part of housing developments.

Mr. NATHAN: The golf courses that were built, in many cases, were built purely as an amenity to sell real estate, where the developer really didn't do any due diligence to determine whether the golf course could survive and thrive as a business on its own.

ALLEN: In many communities, the properties feeling the pinch from the market oversupply are older courses that offer fewer amenities.

(Soundbite of birds chirping)

(Soundbite of thud)

Mr. CHRIS MARSH (Engineer): This is the three-story sporting center that we're looking at, and they're preparing the foundation for the bottom floor of it.

ALLEN: In Royal Palm Beach, Florida, the town is spending \$22 million to turn a golf course into a 160-acre park. Chris Marsh, the village engineer, says the town will rent kayaks here for use in the 22 acres of lakes planned on the site. That, plus a driving range, playgrounds, volleyball courts, and a great lawn for concerts. It will turn a fading golf course into a new centerpiece for the town. Up until a few years ago, it was a golf course called Traditions.

(Soundbite of machine engine, beeping)

Mr. MARSH: It was built in the '60s, and it was obviously developed in order to get people to buy homes surrounding that area. They would fly people in from the Northeast and give them a round of golf and try to sell them a home within the original colony.

ALLEN: Eventually, however, other, nicer courses were built in the area, and the golf course went out of business. For the town, it was an opportunity to acquire a large chunk of parkland in a community where there's little open space still available.

In nearby Deerfield Beach, when the owner of an old golf course there proposed developing it for housing, nearby residents protested. Bob Harbin of the Deerfield Beach Parks and Recreation Department says residents came up with a counter-proposal.

Mr. BOB HARBIN (Deerfield Beach Parks and Recreation Department): So the neighborhood was looking at it primarily as what's the quietest, least-intrusive that appears to be open space we can get, and that's how they came up with a cemetery.

ALLEN: The developer eventually agreed. In return for the land-use change required to turn a golf course into a cemetery, he's also agreed to turn over half of the old gold course to the town for use as a park - probably playgrounds and ball fields. Harbin says those are things that Deerfield Beach - originally built as a retirement community - desperately needs.

Mr. HARBIN: This, just under 50 acres - it's 49-point-something - will increase our parks system in the city by 20 percent. It's like a blessing from heaven.

ALLEN: Something similar is happening in California, Nevada, and many other states, where communities have turned old golf courses into parks. But even with the downturn in golfing, some communities are finding the best new use is the old use.

(Soundbite of sprinklers)

ALLEN: In Davie, a city near Ft. Lauderdale, the sprinklers are running and the greens are trimmed at the old Arrowhead Golf course. It was shut down for a few years, but is getting ready to reopen. Davie's town council recently agreed to buy it. Unlike some other municipalities, Davie has lots of

parks.

Councilman Bryan Caletka says what the town really needs is not a high-end course for tourists, but a public golf course for local residents and high school golf teams.

Councilman BRYAN CALETKA (Davie, Florida): We're going to be a municipal golf course. We're not going to charge \$100 a round. We're going to charge 25 or \$35 a round. And there's not a lot of market competition for that.

ALLEN: Which brings up an axiom of golf marketing communities may want to consider when deciding what to do with their old, fading courses: All golf is local.

Greg Allen, NPR News, Miami.

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