Environment, finances dominate world of golf course designers and builders

By Mark Leslie

Environmental regulations and protective measures are the most crucial issues facing the golf course industry, according to a Golf Course News survey of course builders and architects.

The assessment was at the top of the list on 51 percent of the ballots, sometimes sharing equal billing with financing or water. Financing was listed as the major concern by 59 percent of those voting, the need for less expensive courses 10 percent, water use 8 percent, and the pesticide law 2 percent.

As president of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, Tom Clark said he is "totally concentrating on the environment and permitting issue and on the financial issue. After developers have gone through this (permitting) rimaginaire to get their projects in place, they can't get the money. We (AAGC & Associates) have 26 courses that are looking for financing."

Clark said that while his Kensington, Md., firm routes courses for 80 to 90 projects each year, "we're lucky if two get started in a year."

"We have several developers who have spent $200,000 to $400,000 on engineering and environmental studies and are not even close to breaking ground," Clark said. "In a lot of instances you have to have very deep pockets. And it all gets reflected with the consumer, who is the golfer. A lot of these are public, daily-fee courses — things we need desperately. The counties and communities are in favor of the golf course, but still have to go through the arduous permitting process. In one case we have in Washington, D.C., seven different regulatory agencies were involved in just the irrigation pond."

Clark complained that after the federal government writes legislation or guidelines, states and counties add stricter laws. "It really discourages any development," he said. "This isn't universal," he said. "We're trying to identify certain areas around the country where you can get things done. It's getting tougher and tougher."

He specified the East and West coasts and New England as the regions with the toughest environmental laws, basically because so many regulations apply to specific areas.

Golf course builder Paul Cline of Hartland, Mich., agreed about the great differences between regions, specifying wetlands laws as the most restrictive.

"Determination and enforcement varies dramatically geographically," Cline said.

Architect Steve Burns of Fernandina Beach, Fla., pointed to the recent Supreme Court ruling that local governments can draft more restrictive pesticide regulations than federal laws. "Hopefully, this won't lead to a lot of communities, with no technical knowl-

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Architects and builders alike decry holdups in

Where can you go today and get money? Where's the next group of financing coming from?'— Tom Fazio

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development

e the sources to fund these successful golf concepts.
Architect Tom Fazio predicted that while more than 200 courses will open this year, "that will change drastically."

"Where can you go today and get money?" Fazio asked. "Where's the next group of financing coming from? Hotels are running half of last year in capacity. Look at the financing structure — housing starts and hotels. Real-estate projects are going broke in Florida... It's just like in 1975 and 1981, only more so. Then, there was money in banks and lending institutions. Look at the job market. It has a rippling effect. Look at all the municipalities going bankrupt. Can they afford to build courses? Even if it's done with a bond, are they going to be able to sell it to the voters?"

"I have eight projects with approvals and only one looks like they have the money," said architect Stephen Kay of Bronxville, N.Y.

Bill Kubly, president of Landscapes Unlimited Inc., a course building firm headquartered in Lincoln, Neb., said: "Banks have tightened credit to the point of choking the industry. Government rate reductions have not helped this situation. Another source of funds now has to be used."

Brian Curley, director of golf course design and construction for Landmark Land Co. Inc. of La Quinta, Calif., put much of the blame on the savings and loan crisis. "The S&L fiasco was perpetrated..."
permitting, zoning and financial backing

by a misguided, inept bureaucracy that laid a choke hold on solvent, stable, law-abiding businesses," Curley said.

Clark said the S&L crisis began the entire financial downturn. "No one's loaning money for any project that has anything to do with land," Clark said.

Adding that a few firms are lending on golf projects, Clark said: "It's usually a fairly high rate now. There is financing, but not necessarily beneficial for the developer. A lot of developers are going to alternative sources.

"The private developer is the one caught between a rock and a hard place. They have to get something built, so they go to alternative sources—like people who will build on your land, build a course, operate it for 20 years, then turn the course back over to you. It's not necessarily going to give you the golf course and maintenance quality you desire for your type of development. But they do a pretty good job."

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— Tom Clark

The firms who show environmental innovation in design will be the architects of the 1990s and beyond." James Dobson, president of James Dobson and Associates of Longview, Texas, said more public facilities must be financed for golf to grow.

"Golf must be available to the masses and affordable. Public and municipal facilities aren't 'glamorous' or 'interesting' to the financial world, but they can be very profitable," Dobson said.

Larry Pratt of Pratt Golf Services in Overland Park, Kan., agreed that less-expensive courses must be built.

"I am not taking a Pollyanna approach. I know that with less money, golf courses will not be as fabulous as many that have been built. My argument is that golf courses don't have to be perfect or have all the bells and whistles to be fun to play.

"Most of our new golfers are not upper income, but middle income ... and they cannot afford to play the high-dollar courses regularly. There needs to be more good public-access courses available for reasonable cost. They do not have to possess all the pizzazz that many 1980s courses had. Greater creativity needs to be exercised in how to route and build a course. I think you will see more creativity in the 1990s, because there is not going to be as much money available for development, and the costs of construction and future maintenance are going to be watched more closely. How a course is going to be maintained will again become a factor in design in the 1990s.

Keith Foster, a designer with Arthur Hills & Associates working out of Arizona, said: "Most people will mention environmental issues and financing. I, too, acknowledge the concerns and impacts of both. However, I am also looking closely into high construction costs and the need to return to sound design practices that strive to produce excellent results, yet not at the expense of our clients' wallets."

The golf industry should strive to educate the public about the positive effects of golf courses, said Don Childs, vice president of Bills/Childs Associates of Sylvan Lake, Mich., and Bob Cupp of Cupp Design Inc. in Atlanta, Ga.

"Public opinion should be converted from the perception that golf courses are environmental problems to the proven fact that they are actually phases. They generate oxygen (one course creates enough oxygen for 150,000 people each day) and they purify water. Doctoral-level studies now support this. Turf is the best natural filter known to man!"

The issues are many confronting an industry that, in past decades, faced no opposition.

"The days of (architects Donald) Ross and (A.W.) Tillinghast were like a stroll in the park," said Clark. "They could build a golf course without any concern about opposition groups. But now it is incredible."

Phil Garcia Jr., Florida Division manager of Ryan Incorporated Eastern in Deerfield Beach, Fla., decried the "proliferation of ill-conceived and financed projects, coupled with the state of the financial community.

"Quality versus quantity is what must guide our industry through the 1990s," Garcia said.

Robin Nelson of Nelson & Wright Architects in Honolulu said that as golf courses become more government-regulated, "the costs will skyrocket, affecting the entire industry.

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