Daily fee facilities deserve level playing field

An apple fell on my head during Golf Summit '92, hosted last fall by the National Golf Foundation in Orlando. During a panel discussion on alternative facilities, Bob Barrett — director of golf at Sunbelt Golf Corp. — described how his firm has successfully financed a multi-course golf "trail" in Alabama using state pension funds.

This wasn't news to me. Golf Course News had already published stories on the Jones Trail, so called because all the projects were designed by Bob Barrett, Inc. of Huntsville, Ala.

However, when Barrett had finished, our table was asked to discuss various aspects of the Jones Trail project. My view was unwaveringly clear. What a great idea! Alabama ranks 48th in public golf availability. Affordable greens fees prevail. The state helps fund the project with an eye on tourism dollars down the road. And local builders are put to work.

Most everyone at my table agreed — everyone, that is, except the Zimmermans, a married couple from Wisconsin who own and operate Kettle Hills Golf Course in Richfield. The Zimmermans are tired of competing with "government-funded" (read: municipal) golf facilities in the greater Milwaukee area. The Jones Trail — with its innovative albeit socialist funding mechanism — was the last straw.

"I wonder how the private daily-fee operators in Alabama feel about the project," Mr. Zimmerman, politely but with some irritation, said.

And you know, he has a good point. Because most of them weren't created to make money, municipal courses are often subsidized by city budgets — and don't pay property taxes. The result? Artificially microscopic greens fees.

Mr. Zimmerman's argument was driven home at Public Golf '92, a conference sponsored by Golf Course News in November. Private operators of daily fee golf courses agreed with Mr. Zimmerman: They simply cannot charge municipal-level greens fees and turn a profit.

There's another problem here, totally unrelated to the golf course industry. The Reagan-Bush years saw a sizable decrease in federal funding of mandated programs, such as city governments, in turn, passed on these cuts to municipalities. Federal education funds, for example, are at an all-time, per-pupil low.

Perhaps we can kill a few birds with one mealy stone. Cities and towns are beginning to realize their golf courses can be money-makers. If dressed up a bit, these facilities could charge more for greens fees, and thus augment municipal budgets. Maybe the golf profits could be earmarked for something specific, like schools or trash pickup.

Among other things, Public Golf Magazine calls us that, when it comes to renovations and/or start-up developments, municipalities currently have multiple financial incentives. If municipal courses raise their greens fees and offer commensurate value, isn't everyone better served? The private daily-fee operator gets fair competition. The municipal government can sustain needed programs. While the taxpayer/golfer pays more for municipal golf, he or she also gets a better municipal facility.

Private daily-fee operators don't want municipal facilities to close their doors. They just want to compete on a level playing field. With little ingenuity, cities and towns can make the competition more fair, and some solve all their own problems at the same time.

Public Golf '92 was chock full of lessons for learning

From the State-of-the-Game prologue by Rick Norton to a dynamic presentation on using television and radio to market your golf course by National Golf Course Owners Association President Vince Alfonso Jr., many lessons were taught at Public Golf '92. Golf Course News' first conference on the profitability of public golf was jam-packed with helpful information from some masters of the industry.

Information and suggestions were many and varied. My favorite came from Steve Lesnik, president of Kemper/Lesnik. "Preserving the condition of the golf course is managing for profit. Otherwise, it's like selling a soiled baseball," Lesnik said. Continued on page 50