Gulf of Mexico developers weighing impact of treatise

By ANDREW WHEELER

BAY ST. LOUIS, Miss. — Golf course developers in the five states bordering the Gulf of Mexico are still assessing the potential impact of a federal and state initiative to protect coastal areas.

At a December 1992 conference, government officials from all five states, environmentalists, businesspeople and the Environmental Protection Agency signed on to the Gulf of Mexico Program (GMP).

According to the plan, its goal is "to protect, restore, and enhance the coastal and marine waters of the Gulf of Mexico and its coastal natural habits, to sustain living resources, to protect human health and the food supply, and to ensure the recreational use of Gulf shores, beaches and waters... in ways consistent with the economic well being of the region."

The agreement sets forth a series of nine environmental challenges to be accomplished from 1993 to 1997. While their impact on existing and future golf course projects remains unclear, the GMP goals bear a striking resemblance to restrictive conditions protecting other coastal areas: reduction of at least 10 percent the amount of trash on beaches; an increase in Gulf Coast seagrass beds and in Gulf shellfish beds available for safe harvesting by 10 percent; the reduction of the rate of loss of coastal islands; and the enhancement of Gulf commercial and recreational fisheries.

"I think golf courses can accommodate environmental concerns," said Jeff Brauer, an architect at Golf Scapes in Arlington, Texas, who does not think these measures will affect development significantly. "Golf architects are committed to being green."
Q&A: Rees Jones
Continued from previous page

Course in New Bern, N.C., and they filled the place. We opened Sea Trail [Golf Links in Sunset Beach, N.C.], Southbridge [Golf Course] in Savannah, Ga. It's incredible. We don't know where the golfers are coming from, but when we build a better mouse trap, people come to play.

GCN: We hear that we've come to the end of the financial pipeline of three or four years ago before the recession hit. The 351 and 354 courses that opened in 1991 and 1992 mark the end of that money pipeline, and fewer are in planning. That means fewer jobs for architects. Certain architects will get their half dozen jobs. But there are 250 architects. Will some go out of business?

RJ: I don't think so. There are a lot of single practitioners. There are a lot who are hands-on designers, who work close to home and don't have a big office. I have a small office - three designers, three support staff and 10 construction people. And I think I've stayed the right size to go through this slower period. I think the smaller guys will do just as well as the bigger ones because they don't have as much overhead. Firms like the Nicklaus company and Perry Dye's -- guys who got into the volume -- are the ones who have had to cut back.

GCN: So, what lies ahead doesn't threaten you?

RJ: It may make you change your approach. I think everyone is going to have to get into bonafide, good low-cost public courses. You can still build a darn good course that doesn't have all the mounds and hillocks. You can pick a site that is suitable, not unsuitable. Maybe the game will change a little.

GCN: Your dad is going to retire sometime. What's going to happen to the Robert Trent Jones name?

RJ: That's up to him. My brother is Robert Trent Jones Jr., so the Robert Trent Jones name will survive.

GCN: Yes, but there's only one Robert Trent Jones Sr. Is there a mantle that will be passed on?

RJ: I don't know. I don't deal with my dad in his business. Dad is an optimist. I don't believe he thinks in terms of retirement.

GCN: How about you? Will you ever retire?

RJ: Someday. I'll slow down. I don't think at 86 I'd want to be doing a dozen golf courses a year [like Jones Sr. does].

GCN: Or 18 in Alabama [like Jones Sr. in 1992-93] for that matter, huh?

RJ: That's right. I think I'll always enjoy doing a few good ones. I'm into quality, not quantity.

GCN: How old are you now?

RJ: 51.

GCN: So you're going to retire...

RJ: I can't see what's down the road. I love what I do. Basically, I don't work. I can take three days off and play Pine Valley, Merion and Aronimink and not worry about having to ask somebody if I can do it. So this is a pretty good business.

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GOLF COURSE NEWS

Continued from page 25
environmentally friendly.”

However, Brauer indicated a developer might not be willing to pay the financial burden of meeting environmental statutes. The resolution of this dilemma, he said, often decides whether or not a course is built.

According to William Whitson, chief of operations for the GMP, the EPA will implement specific programs to meet the environmental goals. “The GMP is an intra-agency effort under the leadership of the EPA to put together a comprehensive plan for the Gulf of Mexico,” Whitson explained.

The idea of the GMP was actually conceived in late 1988. Five citizens from each state representing business, tourism, agricultural, environmental and fisheries interests formed the Citizens’ Advisory Committee. The committee met three times a year to identify environmental issues and to discuss strategies in communicating with the public about the importance of these problems.

“I don’t think anyone looking at the goals would find it detrimental to business interests,” said Fred Bedsoe, Alabama’s business representative.

When told of the GMP’s goals, Jack Mathis, head of the Florida Golf Council, said the effect on development in his state won’t be felt for some time. “There will probably be a trickle-down effect,” he remarked.

According to Ron Garl, an architect in Lakeland Fla., “It hasn’t affected us yet, but it sounds like the sort of thing that will.”

Bottom line along Gulf: Will developers pay the price?
Continued from page 25