Texas state park project moves forward despite opposition

HOUSTON, Texas — State parks officials will proceed with the $1 million expansion of Bastrop State Park Golf Course despite a decision by the National Parks Service not to help fund the project.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department had applied for a $500,000 matching federal grant to expand the nine-hole golf course at Bastrop State Park, about 30 miles east of Austin.

The project garnered little notice until environmentalists rented a billboard to warn residents that $1 million in tax dollars would be used to expand a golf course.

Calif. shootout?

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Board of Supervisors, who argued the proposed resort would be a good use of less productive farmland in an area that’s trying to pump up its tourist economy.

Willms Ranch, however, is under the Williamson Act contract, which means the owners have agreed to keep the land in agricultural production in exchange for tax breaks. The 10-year contract reduces tax bills by an average of 40 percent. The law was designed to continue taxing farms as farms instead of as potential subdivision land. It aims to keep farmers from succumbing to development pressures in order to meet high tax bills. The contracts essentially allow property to be assessed at current income level. The state then reimburases counties for part of the lost property taxes. The state paid out $35 million last year to make up for Williamson Act enrollments.

In the past, landowners with Williamson Act contracts who wanted to develop golf courses tried to cancel their contracts, paying hefty fees. Now more and more landowners are trying to argue that golf courses are allowed as a recreational use under the Williamson Act, letting them get other tax breaks and still develop the land.

The lawsuit’s petitioners argue that recreational uses on state-protected farmland shouldn’t displace agricultural production.

The Willms Ranch case is expected to set precedents for future development proposals on Williamson Act farmland. The case also will shed light on a new law that went into effect Jan. 1, tightening the definition of what recreational uses are allowed on Williamson Act farmland.

The law doesn’t specifically target golf courses, but it bars recreational uses on Williamson Act land that would hamper a farm’s long-term productivity or displace the agricultural use of the land.

For some, beautiful drives down the fairway occur long before the first tee time.