State Parks: Public-use issues guard golf's latest frontier

By J. Barry Mothes

Proposals to build golf courses in state parks from New Jersey to Tennessee have stirred up considerable debate inside and outside the golf industry. Not surprisingly, almost all the proposals have generated heated challenges from organized environmental groups. Though all the proposed courses are public-access, they've drawn criticism from local athletic and recreation groups, everyday park users and even, in some cases, golfers. Many argue that courses are a narrow, exclusionary use of scarce, natural public land that should be reserved for picnicking, walking, hiking, bicycling and other uses.

Some state officials and developers, meanwhile, counter that golf courses can be excellent revenue sources for state parks, especially those that are already struggling because of less funding. In some cases, the proposed golf courses are recommended for land that is essentially unused and would take up relatively little of the total acreage of the parks. Using part of a park for a golf course, goes the argument, might not be such a bad thing if revenues and increased traffic from it allow the rest of the park to survive and thrive.

A quick rundown on some high-profile proposals:
- In Tennessee, the state has signed on with Golf Services Group of Houston to build and operate four Jack Nicklaus-designed 18-hole golf courses at four different state park sites for $20 million. There has been controversy surrounding at least two of the proposed sites and a citizens' environmental group is fighting in court to stop the entire plan. Current Gov. Don Sundquist, who inherited the proposed project when he took office in January, has been asked — even by some legislators who originally favored the idea — to reject the plan.
- In Maryland, a Nicklaus-designed 18-hole golf course and convention center at Rocky Gap State Park are part of a proposed $34 million resort intended to revitalize the Western Maryland economy.
- In Texas, state officials are looking to expand a 1930s vintage nine-hole course at Bastrop State Park to 18 holes (the state also operates two other 9-hole courses and one 18-hole track in its 120-park system but has no plans to expand those). A request for a matching $500,000 federal grant for the proposed $1 million Bastrop project was turned down and the National Parks Service has indicated the project would diminish the historical value of the park. But the state recently asked for the grant request to be reinstated and it is under review.
- In Mississippi, the state is getting ready to build an 18-hole public-access golf course in Percy Quin State Park not far from the Mississippi-Louisiana border. An attempt by a local citizens group who favored keeping the park undeveloped was rejected by a local judge. Timber-cutting is expected to start soon.
- In New Jersey, Gov. Christine Whitman is still mulling a highly-anticipated decision on a proposed 18-hole golf course that would be built on largely unused land inside Liberty State Park, one of the most popular access spots to the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. Whitman was supposed to make a decision in January but has moved the deadline toward several times. A decision is expected in the next two months.

Golf course development in state parks is not a new phenomenon. Thirteen states, including Oklahoma, Texas and Alabama, and even Tennessee, have had golf courses inside state parks since the 1930s. Many of those courses, however, were relatively modest layouts, often with very modest clubhouse facilities — in some cases a snack bar, cash register and bathrooms. The four Texas state park courses, for example, were built during the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s. They offer basic, fast-playing — if nonetheless scenic — golf courses and a small "concession" building where greens fees are handled. These facilities pale in comparison to the acreage, style and budget of most of this latest round of proposals, which are also coming at a time of heightened awareness and sensitivity to land use.

The most ambitious and increasingly volatile situation is in Tennessee, where former Gov. Ned McWherter signed on to the $20 million deal with the Golf Services Group in December 1994, just before leaving office.

Almost immediately, residents near the small lakeside Panther Creek State Park, near Nolensville, Tennessee, and two others that are mixed-use areas and then they have parks that are more developed that have things like golf courses, marinas, launches, soccer fields, pools, beaches and parks.

"I think that's the best way to do it," Hardy continued. "You have the chance to appeal to everyone. A lot of people think that golf as an introduction to the outdoors is wonderful. They want to go out and bird-watch and hike and I think that's wonderful. But other people think they have the chance to go to a state park and go to a martina or play golf."