Golf's Environmental Principles merit your attention, retention

By PAT JONES

You may have blinked recently and missed one of the more important developments in the modern history of our industry. Last April, without much fanfare, the Environmental Principles for Golf Courses in the United States were adopted and endorsed by almost 20 major golf associations and environmental groups. The Principles are voluntary guidelines designed to promote responsible siting, design, construction and management.

Here's a typical passage from the section on maintenance: "Store and handle all pest control and nutrient products in a manner that minimizes worker exposure and/or the potential for point or non-point source pollution. Employ proper chemical storage practices and use suitable personal protective equipment.”

But more important, nature abhors a vacuum. Without national guidelines, local governments were creating their own very restrictive rules. The regulations adopted in Baltimore and Santa Clara County, Calif., are so tough they almost prohibit new construction. The simple existence of a set of cooperatively developed principles makes it less likely that goofy, one-sided regulations and restrictions will continue to pop up around the country.

(A side note: some in golf — particularly developers who had experienced the wrath of environmental activists — kept asking, "Why are we doing this?"

For the first time, major environmental groups that had previously been highly critical of golf went on the record saying that a well-developed, well-managed golf course can actually be an environmental asset. Wow! Suddenly Ron Dodson and Audubon International were no longer alone among environmentalists in affirming what we've believed all along.

So, from that perspective, the principles are more of a treaty document than a set of specific "best management practices.” They are a public acknowledgment that the golf industry and the environmental community have a mutual interest. We didn't agree on everything, but we found a way to agree on most things. That has tremendous value in terms of public perception.

3. It's an educational document. Let's face it, developers have been known not to anticipate environmental issues until after ground's been broken — and they've paid the price with delays, bad public relations and higher costs. Further, how much of the local opposition to courses has been based on misperceptions and invalid assumptions about standard industry practices? The principles will help to educate people on both sides.

4. It's a unique achievement. During the final conference at which the principles were rolled out, one of the environmental delegates said, "The golf industry feared that, if we endorsed any guidelines, they would quickly become law and the bureaucrats and lawyers would put us out of business. That's why the principles had to be voluntary to gain endorsement from the various golf groups.

Have you read the Environmental Principles? The golf industry was concerned about the principles being interpreted to strictly — that they could be used to stop a good project.

By PAT JONES

Pat Jones served on the GCSAA staff for nearly a decade and was one of the primary authors of the Environmental Principles. He is now group manager at Selz/Seabolt Communications in Chicago, where he provides public relations services and environmental counseling to clients inside and outside of golf.

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GOLF COURSE NEWS

FROM THE EDITOR

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now and Jan. 1. Because we publish our handy-dandy Buyer's Guide in December, I figured I would alert you net-thusiasts now, in order that you might enjoy the site during the holiday season. As we all know, there's nothing like washing down a good mole cricket story with a little egg nog.

Why hasn't Golf Course News been online until now? Well, it took time to find the right Internet provider (you folks who haven't dealt with these characters will more fully understand what I mean when you make your own inevitable on-line jump). Also, we wanted GCN On-Line to be something really special — not just another run-of-the-mill web site with standard graphics and content.

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It's interesting to note that course management companies, not the architects themselves, have taken issue with a particular golf hole's trade dress. While the owners of Pebble Beach, Harbour Town and Pinehurst have objected to the duplication of their golf holes at Houston's Tour 18 Golf Club (see story page 37), there's no way to ask, say, Donald Ross whether he approves of developers replicating his designs. Jack Neville, the designer of Pebble Beach who passed away in 1978, cannot be reached for comment, either.

However, Ed Seay, whose Bay Hill design (with Arnold Palmer), was duplicated at Houston's Tour 18, says it's all a matter of perspective.

"Now, I can see an owner getting upset," Seay opines. "If someone has paid a very large price for uniqueness, for exclusivity, they have a reasonable right for that to be honored. But I think if a designer's upset with it, they're a little insecure. I would consider it a compliment. Don't you want people to enjoy your work?"

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is now on the leading edge of environmental responsibility in this country." Think about that for a minute. How many industries have done what we did? In short, the principles put us way ahead of the curve.

Frankly, the successful principles effort should have garnered more national media attention. It's a great story of an entire industry working cooperatively and proactively to protect the environment. But hey, as the old newsroom saying goes, "Good news is no news." The non-golf media are still far more interested in our industry's one alleged ghost (Lt. George Prior of chlorothalonil fame) than in something enormously positive like this. What a pity.

5. We built relationships. While the process of negotiating the principles language was a tremendous drain on both sides, it also brought the people and organizations closer together. Consider, for example, the fact that Dr. Jay Feldman, head of National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides, sent me a holiday greeting card last Christmas. GCSAA even hosted one of the coalition's board meetings at the Lawrence headquarters.

Now consider that just a year earlier, the cover of NCAMP's magazine had featured an illustration of a giant skull-and-crossbones superimposed over a golfer!

Everyone in golf should be proud of the principles. They may not be an exact road map for environmental responsibility, but they do represent something much greater: a mutual commitment to preserving the environment without damaging the game's vitality and integrity.

James Phillips

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Phillips comment

"Good news is no news." The old newsroom saying goes, "Don't you want people to enjoy your work?"

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