Airport-area courses ready for take-off?

By J. BARRY MOTHES

“Cheap land near airport. Water, sewage and electricity already in place. Located near transportation center. Possible neighbors include office or industrial parks. Round-the-clock security available.”

Sound like a good fit for golf course development? In a growing number of locations across the country — from Mississippi to Los Angeles to Minneapolis-St. Paul — it is.

Within the last year, an increasing number of public golf course projects have been proposed for sites at or very near airports. Some, like the under-construction Airline Golf Club at the Hattiesburg-Laurel Airport in Mississippi, are close to becoming reality.

The 18-hole Airline Golf Club is scheduled to open for play by September. The daily-fee golf course will cover 141 acres and sit near an 800-acre business park run by the airport authority.

“We think we’ve got a very good match with the golf course at our airport,” said David Senne, executive director of the Hattiesburg-Laurel Regional Airport Authority, which is leasing the land for 25 years to the developer, Deerfield Golf. The golf course was designed by Rich Fulkerson, who is also part of the development, design and management team.

“We have excellent transportation access,” Senne said, “with the airport and an

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A Development’s Tale

Happy ending for 25-year-old Wash. state proposal?

By BOB SPIWAK

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To understand the conflict — which has, at times, pitted neighbor against neighbor — a closer look at the resort site is necessary.

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projects there three to five years ago, and they are only just now beginning to break even.
GCN: And France?
CR: France took a dive about five years ago and is still in the doldrums. They are trying to dig the courses they built because, basically, they over-built, underplanned and misconceived. Too many people suddenly found golf in vogue and built courses where they shouldn't have been built. There wasn't the market for them. As they say in France, it's the third owner who makes the money. Eight to 10 years ago, when France discovered golf was not just an elitist sport, many landscape persons and building architects got into golf course architecture. Now half of them are out of business.
GCN: Is there any positive activity?
CR: Germany has built a lot of courses toward the Berlin area... For years there was a tax incentive: If you were a non-profit club you could only charge a certain amount of dues to members and a certain entrance fee. That culminated big investments in golf because developers wanted to run them as non-profits but the numbers didn't work out to get an expensive course and an expensive architect. Of all the countries in Europe, Germany with all its money has turned out the fewest first-rate courses of any of the western European countries. First, they couldn't justify the expensive course and vis-a-vis the "big-name" architect and maintain their tax-exempt status because if you can only charge $50,000 in membership fees you can't justify a $3 million to $5 million course.

The other thing: Germany has been at the forefront of the ecological movement — The Greens. It is very difficult to get planning permission to do anything in what was West Germany.

GCN: Will this change?
CR: I don't know. The environmental movement is still pretty strong. Like in the States, they are coming to grips with the fact golf is not all bad. But it's been an uphill fight — very slow going.

GCN: Is there a trend toward coming out of the doldrums?
CR: Looking at the tourist areas — essentially around the Mediterranean or coastal areas of Portugal; Portugal remains very strong, given the population base. (Architect) Rocky Roquemore has done a lot of work there. I have some projects there. It's a very English market, and a secondary German market touristically. They have had good success with golf as a tourist amenity. In south of Spain, what is generally called Costa del Sol, it is almost built out.

GCN: What type of projects are being undertaken?
CR: I recently took some Cyprian clients to Spanish golf resorts. We concluded that Spain has no golf resorts in Costa del Sol in the sense that you might consider them in the States, where there is a big hotel and two or three golf courses. It's primarily real estate. There may be a hotel. But there is always that bastard marriage between a hotel and one or, at best, two courses, having to deal with their clients and the homeowners who buy around it.

In that sense, in the south of Spain and the south of Portugal, for the most part, it's a mixture of real estate plus hotel and golf. The drawback here is that that solution works with two or three courses, but it doesn't generally work well with just one course.

GCN: Is golf gaining popularity in Europe?
CR: Definitely. In Spain, you see far more Spaniards on the golf course than you ever did. In the summer months, everyone is playing their own courses. The courses used to be absolutely barren in June, July and August. Now they're full of Spaniards. I tried to play in Dar Es Salaam in Morocco two years ago and couldn't get on it. It was sold out to Moroccan members.

GCN: What's your outlook for the short-term future in Europe?
CR: I think it's good. Golf is cyclical. Real-estate development is cyclical. At the end of every cycle, they learn the lessons of what went wrong before... The real estate and golf relationship is now a proven fact in Europe. Whether in central and northern Europe (north of the Pyrenees) they will allow more golf and real-estate development to occur is a big question.