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Stormwater runoff

Commissioners, were created in part to help pay the costs of capital improvements to the county's stormwater system. But many courses began receiving annual stormwater bills that increased anywhere from seven to 20 times. Foxfire Golf Club, a privately-owned 27-hole daily-fee facility, paid $5,466 in assessments in 1993 but saw its bill jump to $37,840 in 1995. Municipal golf courses are exempt from the assessments.

The Suncoast Golf Courses Association recently won a concession from the county in the ongoing struggle. The county agreed to reduce the annual assessment rate for 1997-98 from .148 to .037, a 75 percent reduction that will mean a combined $250,000 reduction in the amount paid by the courses. But Linda Talbot, vice-president and manager of the Foxfire Golf Club and president of the Suncoast Golf Courses Association, said the .037 rate is still too high. The association would like to see the rate go down to at least .0257, a difference that represents thousands of dollars.

"It's still a slap in the face as far as I'm concerned," said Talbot. "It's outrageous. The figures they are getting are out of whack compared with what agriculture is paying. They're paying 10 percent less than we are. We still have to continue the fight. We're sod farmers in the purest sense of the word... We're being penalized because we allow people to play on the surface we cultivate."

Talbot said the county's assessment rate, even the recently reduced one, is "not based on scientific facts... it was a politically expedient thing for them to do to send off the litigation..." She also criticized some of the standards used by the county to develop the rate level for golf courses. She said cart paths are factored in, for example, as if they were large-scale parking lots. In developing its original rate, the county also stated that it assumed golf courses irrigated at least 3.5 inches a week and that agricultural concerns did not irrigate, both of which proved to be untrue. J. P. Marchand, the deputy director of transportation for Sarasota County who oversees the county's stormwater program, said the new, reduced rate for golf courses was the result of using more sophisticated methodology. He said it recognizes that golf courses do not contribute as much runoff as a neighborhood lawn.

"I think our initial rate was fair," said Marchand, the former manager of the stormwater program, "but maybe you could say the new rate is more fair." As we move on we may make even more refinements... Maybe we could have gotten to this step sooner... but we've made some adjustments and some modifications."

Golf courses and government bodies in several other counties in Florida have been watching the Sarasota stormwater assessment controversy with great interest. Stormwater runoff assessments, like fire and rescue, are what are known as non-ad valorem and are assessed against individual property owners according to the benefits to that particular property. In Florida, except for certain charter counties, non-ad valorem assessments like the stormwater runoff one may be made by the county without a public vote, which is what happened in Sarasota. The concern of golf courses across the state is that Sarasota County's treatment of privately-owned golf courses could become a pattern in other counties.

Talbot said even though her group's legal costs are rising, they will continue to fight the county, and if necessary, help golf course owners in other counties. Don Hemke, an attorney with the firm of Carlton Fields in Tampa, has been representing the golf course owners group since January. "I think we have a challenge and obligation to educate the County Board of Commissioners," said Talbot, "to educate politicians about what we do, and how well we do it, how much oxygen we supply, how much nature we support and how careful we are with the chemicals we do use."