Where does golf fit into the land-use argument?

BY RON DODSON

The main problem with land is the fact that we can't make any more of it. There is only so much to go around and we each want to have a say in how to use it. We want to live on it, grow food on it, play games on it, bury our wastes in it, or try to set it aside so that future generations have access to its recreational and historical value.

Each of us has our own opinion concerning the most appropriate and effective ways to use the land, and this leads to inevitable conflict as communities make daily decisions about land use and planning.

So where does golf fit into all of this? For a number of years Audubon International has said that properly sited, appropriately designed, and well-managed golf courses can represent one of the better types of land development and use. From a wildlife and habitat perspective, given that the land is suitable for development, we do believe it's better to develop a golf course than a parking lot, or 500 residential homes, or a mall.

Some would argue that we promote land development, but that's not accurate. We accept that land development is a reality, but we support and promote land development that is sustainable.

The reality is that this county is founded on the free enterprise system and it is the economic engine that runs our nation. It helps to support such things as social programs and land acquisition for state and national parks, as well as private enterprises. It helps to provide jobs that, in turn, provide opportunities for people to better their economic positions in life for themselves and their offspring.

Since the creation of the United States, the free enterprise system has included the concept that one can own land — that it can be bought and sold and used for a variety of purposes. However, we have made some poor choices and unsustainable decisions regarding the use of land and resources. That is why we have seen totally polluted lakes and rivers, acidified lakes, wetlands drained, significant habitat loss and the extinction of many species.

So, if we accept the economic reality of land development, then we must set ourselves on a path of sustainability so that we don't use up or abuse what we have left. Then, we can have something for our children and grandchildren to enjoy. 

PROPERLY SITED

The first and most critical decision is golf course site selection, and the rule should be obvious to everyone: Choose properties that are good sites for golf courses. Why purchase land to build a golf course, or anything else for that matter, when the land is full of wetlands?

Some people believe a golf course can be built anywhere, and, in reality, there are machines that can make it happen. This has caused the creation of stringent laws and regulations to protect land and the rights of adjoining landowners. That, in turn, has created extensive environmental impact statements and prolonged public hearings. This expensive government regulatory process, coupled with the use of expensive construction equipment, has driven the cost of development to astronomical levels. It is clear that this approach is unsustainable economically and most certainly environmentally.

APPROPRIATELY DESIGNED

In addition to site selection, the next most obvious decision is designing the golf course with the land rather than over it. Modern-day technology and heavy construction equipment have made it possible to move, shave, cut, scrape, pile, fill, and shape nearly any site to fit the most unrealistic dream a developer or architect may have.

A golf course can be anything you want it to be. But again, at what economic and environmental cost? Asking golf course architects to design an "environmentally sensitive" golf course on a piece of property that is inappropriate for development is begging for disaster for the project, the course, and the golf course industry.

Doesn't it make more sense to study the contours of the land and take into consideration the most appropriate and effective ways to use the land?
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Continued from page 9 consideration natural features and resources, and enhance or restore the pre-existing uniqueness of the land rather than destroy it all and then recreate it in ways that can't be sustained over time?

WELL MANAGED

The decisions made regarding a "proper" site and an "appropriate" design will have a long-term effect on the superintendent who is left behind to manage the course. If poor sitting and design decisions are made, subsequent management decisions may become expensive and burdensome. For those who are dedicated to being environmental stewards of the land, it's a frustrating balancing act.

They will be required to make decisions and take responsibility for pesticide use, assessing the subsequent impact on water quality throughout the community, and conserving natural resources, all the while keeping fairways green and members happy.

Decisions regarding golf course construction should always ultimately be founded on the history and tradition of golf - a game with its roots in nature. Nature rarely presents us with what has become the "television-studio" approach to golf course development and design.

Rather, we should develop land and design golf courses that provide the opportunity to showcase environmental stewardship. Likewise, we should manage our golf courses as exemplars of environmental stewardship. Anything less will be a disservice to our fellow human beings, the golf course industry, and the future of our planet.

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