Heritage, Hillwood acquire Weston Hills in joint venture

SAN DIEGO — Golf course owners and operator Heritage Golf Group and Hillwood, a real estate and development company owned by Ross Perot Jr., have teamed to purchase West€ton, Fla.-based Weston Hills Country Club. To make the joint purchase, the two companies formed a limited liability partnership, WHCC LLC.

Weston Hills is a private club consisting of two 18-hole courses designed by Robert Trent Jones Jr.

Bob Husband, president and CEO of Heritage Golf, said the company was pleased to add Weston Hills to Heritage's portfolio. Weston Hills is the 10th course Heritage owns.

"Weston Hills is an extraordinary acquisition for Heritage because of its unique quality and the reputation it enjoys in the surrounding areas of Jacksonville and Palm Beach," he said.

Commercial Bancorp

Continued from page 1

"Ninety percent of the time, they're not educated to the point where they know what they should be doing — they're just not there yet," said Cummings. He said Pace said is something a lot of operators fail to think about.

"You have a storefront and a community around it," he said. "You're bringing customers back repeatedly. It's not just that you have a great location.

"Tee times are perishable goods. Once that 10 o'clock tee time passes, it's never coming back," he added.

Unfortunately, Mooney said, too many independent owners across the country are ill-prepared to either buy a course or, once they've bought or built it, to run one, although he said most management companies do a good job at recognizing potential pitfalls.

"There's a lot of good management companies out there, but you have 17,000 courses around the country, and a large amount of owners are just not capable of running that type of business," he said.

More and more people who are getting into golf ownership and operation are "getting it," said Mooney.

"Golf is changing a lot. The guys who are coming on line now are much different from the old owners," Mooney said. "The new are astute and they're grasping this stuff."

While the golf business may constantly evolve, Mooney said it is confident that his company's model works in the current economic climate.

"We try to make people think on a deeper level because that's what it takes right now in the golf market to get the financing," he said. "It will change, it always does. Three or four years from now, all I may have to do is say, 'Come in and we'll get you a loan.'"

But right now you can't do it that way.

Cummings said some people who Commercial Bancorp turns down are astounded that they aren't able to get a loan, but most understand that there are some things they need to consider before trying again.

"Just recently, we've probably turned down even the first review of about $100 million," Cummings said. "These people are just not where they need to be; they don't know what animal they're trying to tame."

NGCOA summit

Continued from previous page

The summit was revamped to focus on issues that affect golf courses in today's economy.

"The Solutions Summit will provide golf course owners with the tools they need to survive and thrive in this soft economic climate," Hughes said.

On Feb. 24 and 25, more than 100 exhibitors will take place in the summit's trade show. At previous NGCOA annual conferences, the trade show had been limited to one day.

The summit's Idea Fair and Problem Busters events are intended to give owners and operators an opportunity to share ideas and find solutions to the challenges they face.

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"These units are used at over 40 golf courses nationally and have been proven to help players maintain a proper pace, or even shave many minutes off their round," said John Fianrud, Sleep Hollow's golf professional. Fianrud said pace of play at Sleepy Hollow has improved significantly since the devices were installed, with the average nine holes dropping as much as 40 minutes.

The statistics were recorded through a tracking system implemented at Sleepy Hollow that compares 2002 turn times with 2001 times to assess the effectiveness of Personal Rangers. The Metroparks District's Manakiki Golf Course clubhouse staff uses "wave" tee times on weekends and holidays. According to head pro Tom Kochensparger, this system has been effective in maintaining the course's pace of play.

The first wave begins around sunrise. Sixteen groups go off the first tee, and 13 go off the 10th. After all groups have made the turn, the staff shuts down both tees so play can move from one nine to the other.

After all the groups have made the turn, the staff begins a new wave. This second wave usually finishes around 1 o'clock, when the course returns to a traditional first-tee start.

Kochensparger said the wave system allows staff to regulate how many groups are on the course and to boost their revenue-generating play, which leads to better pace of play. It also allows the course to host more players during prime morning hours.

Manakiki also posts selected turn and finish times in a public location on the course to make players aware of improvements in overall course pace of play. This encourages a "healthy competition" in players, keeping them focused on improving pace of play.

At Shawnee Mills and Big Met courses, clocks with pace of play will be installed at the first, third, sixth, ninth, 12th and 15th tees. The objective is to increase the pace of play through playing to the rules.

With these initiatives in place, players on Cleveland Metroparks golf courses will see the Park District's commitment to promoting a healthy, competitive environment among players, according to Hughes.

Michelle R. Smith works for Cleveland Metroparks.