

GOLF COURSE NEWS

THE BUSINESS NEWSPAPER FOR THE GOLF COURSE INDUSTRY

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PGA vice president of agronomy Jon Scott and architect Mike DeVries debate whether green speed thrills or kills.

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COUNTERPOINT

Bayer ES to retain Chipco product line

By ANDREW OVERBECK

MONTVALE, N.J. — Bayer ES has reached an agreement with regulatory officials and BASF AG on the divestiture of its key insecticide active ingredient fipronil. The deal includes back-licenses that allow Bayer ES to continue to market fipronil products, including the Chipco Choice line, to the turf and ornamental markets worldwide. BASF, which bought fipronil, will have rights to the active ingredient in the global professional pest control and agricultural markets.

The divestiture of fipronil and other fungicides was required by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission and European Commission as part of Bayer CropScience's acquisition Aventis CropScience. The planned divestiture was announced in late October and negotiations between Bayer ES and BASF finally wrapped up after the European Commission approved the deal March 24.

Retaining rights to market the Chipco products in the turf and ornamental market gives Bayer ES a solid insecticide lineup.

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MUNICIPAL GOLF UNDER SIEGE



Sassamon Trace Golf Course in Natick, Mass., is one of several municipal courses nationwide experiencing financial hardship.

By DEREK RICE

NATICK, Mass. — In March, the executive-length Sassamon Trace Golf Course became the focal point of an election for town selectman when a candidate proposed closing or selling the course, which was projected to lose \$300,000 in its fiscal year ending June 30.

While this case took place on a small scale — an executive course in a small town — it illustrates the challenges facing municipalities across the country. In a down economy, towns and cities look to improve their fiscal bottom line. And with course revenues

and rounds played numbers either flat or falling nationwide (see story below), municipal golf courses can be seen as good targets for cutting costs.

"It's the towns, cities and golf courses that lose out," said Pat Berger, business manager for Boston-based Sterling Golf Management, which operates Sassamon Trace.

The town of Natick also considered terminating its agreement with Sterling. The town's finance committee has approved the course's \$400,000 budget, which will carry operations through December, or until the Sterling

contract runs out. At press time, the budget still needed to be approved at an April town meeting.

Beyond December, the course's future is uncertain. Before that time, the town will consider whether to renew the contract

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Rounds dip, revenues flat

By DEREK RICE

JUPITER, Fla. — According to the National Golf Foundation (NGF), two out of every three golf facilities in the United States reported a decrease in rounds played in 2002. In addition, the NGF said, revenues at facilities were flat, thus creating a potentially dangerous mix for the golf industry.

The research study, conducted in conjunction with several industry organizations, showed rounds played dropped three percent from 2001 levels. Revenues increased, but only by 0.9 percent, according to the NGF. These numbers came from a January 2003 survey of 2,191 golf

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Editorial Focus: Putting Green Management

Morris' Stimpmeter study reveals optimum speed

By ANDREW OVERBECK

FRANKFORT, Mich. — The Stimpmeter has never been a superintendent's best friend, but here at Crystal Downs Country Club, Mike Morris has changed all that. After an exhaustive two-year study that included Stimping two greens twice a day, collecting weather data, recording cultural practices and surveying members, Morris has determined the optimum green speed for the 1933



Asst. superintendent Don Roth checks out a pin placement.

Alister MacKenzie and Perry Maxwell-designed layout.

"We never had a problem with green speed before," said Morris. "But the issue arose at the club after we had a course come in up the street that had A4 bentgrass greens that were fast as lightning. All of a sudden it became a problem.

"The greens committee wanted to know two things: What is the most appropriate green speed for our golf course, and what is

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Municipalities rethinking golf courses

Continued from page 1

with Sterling, lease the course or close it altogether. However, the town still owes money on a construction bond, so it appears unlikely the town would close Sassamon Trace, town administrator Philip E. Lemnios told a Finance Committee meeting in late March, according to the Boston Globe.

Sterling also manages a municipal course in nearby Chelmsford with much different results for that city. That contract calls for Chelmsford to receive \$50,000 a year or 16 percent of the course's revenue, whichever is higher.

According to Berger, the situation in Natick is just the latest in a line of similar problems. Sterling also faces a lawsuit from a competitor who lost out on a bid to manage Strawberry Valley Golf Course for the town of Abington last fall.

"Things are particularly difficult in this area right now between trying to do the best job we can managing the courses we have and having our bid contracts delayed by the legal battles of the losing bidder whenever our proposals are chosen over theirs," Berger said.

The course was built three years ago atop a former landfill. In its history, its revenues have never covered expenses, but officials had always been willing to give it time to grow.

A sampling from around the country shows a number of municipalities taking a hard look at their golf courses in an attempt to keep spending under control, with varying results.

RECLAIMING CONTROL

Some cities, like Seattle, are reclaiming control of their courses from third-party managers. In Seattle's case, this was a non-profit organization, Municipal Golf of Seattle (MGS). Faced with a \$1.2 million operating deficit, the city decided to take back operations at three of its largest golf courses, West Seattle GC, Jackson Park GC and Jefferson Park GC.

In the beginning of the relationship, MGS promised to upgrade the city's courses, but never got around to doing so. The Seattle Times reports MGS was \$1.3 million behind in payments to the city for maintenance.

The future of the courses is un-

clear, but according to reports, the city has already fired two of the three directors of golf and reassigned the third to a new department. Seven temporary maintenance positions have also been eliminated.

GETTING OUT OF GOLF

A number of municipalities are washing their hands entirely of their golf courses. The city of Scranton, Pa., recently sold its municipal course at an auction for nearly \$3.5 million. Among the prospective buyers for the course was nearby Jefferson Township, which dropped out of the bidding because it could not bid any higher without raising taxes, the Scranton Times reported.

The move appears to make fiscal sense for Scranton. With \$695,000 remaining on a note against the sale, the city stands to pocket a tidy sum on the sale and will no longer have to incur operating costs.

GETTING INTO GOLF

The news is not entirely bleak on the municipal golf front. There are some municipalities, like Jefferson Township, looking to add a golf course to their budgets without having to take on the expense of construction. One such city is Raleigh, N.C., which is considering the purchase of the

Donald Ross-designed Raleigh Country Club, currently mired in Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

Of course, for this tentative plan to work, the club would have to miss its June 9 deadline for emerging from Chapter 11, something one of the club's members told the Charlotte News Observer he is confident it will do.

MUNICIPAL GOLF'S FUTURE

Where the future of municipal golf lies is up in the air, but there are a number of organizations that would like to see more cities getting into the golf course business in order to preserve the notion of affordable public golf.

The American Society of Golf Course Architects (ASGCA) has encouraged towns and cities to pursue building and operating golf courses as a way to grow the game.

"Research by Golf 20/20 shows that there is a pent-up demand for courses that are fun to play by people new to the game, and we believe that growing communities, especially in non-metropolitan areas, will recognize the opportunity," ASGCA president Jay Morrish said.

Morrish said he hopes communities will realize that golf courses can be as important to the recreation

mix as other types of facilities.

"Most growing communities are quick to provide baseball fields, soccer complexes and tennis courts, and now we are seeing a realization that simpler, less-expensive golf courses can be part of the overall recreational mix," Morrish said. "And, unlike the other free facilities, municipal golf courses can support themselves and even provide additional funding for the other sports fields."

Courses like Sassamon Trace that are built atop less-than-desirable sites like landfills also will play an important role in the progression of municipal golf, Morrish said.

"Many communities are converting landfills, brownfields, quarries and abandoned rail yards, mines and other degraded sites into golf courses," Morrish said. "If there's enough land for a regulation 18-hole course, that's great. If there isn't, an executive course, par-three or short course will work, too."

As a means of controlling expenses and boosting revenues, Morrish suggested municipalities may want to look into building such "alternative" courses, such as Sassamon Trace. ■

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