Golf course architects see more renovations, fewer new projects

As the U.S. experiences a
shift in market conditions
and demographics, golf course
architects have been acclimating
to market changes that include
more golf course renovation
projects and fewer new construc-
tion jobs.

This was discussed as the AS-
GCA hosted a panel at the recent
Golf Industry Show in Anaheim,
Calif., to share observations of
current market trends. The panel
included ASGCA associate Gil
Hanse, past ASGCA president
Damian Pascuzzo and members
Steve Smyers and Doug Carrick.

There was discussion about
the latest numbers from NGF,
which state there was a net loss
of 26 golf courses in the United
States in 2006. However, there
has been an increase in new golf
courses elsewhere, including Eu-
rope, the Middle East and South
Africa, panelists say.

One of the reasons why golf
course closings outpaced open-
ings is the value of the land on
which courses lie. During the
past seven years, 24 facilities in
Myrtle Beach, S.C., closed or

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have been slated to close, says Greg Muirhead, president of the ASGCA and panel moderator. Land's increasing value has caused several golf course owners to sell their property, he says.

Instead of new course openings, investments are being made to renovate existing courses at private club facilities, says Smyers, who's working on four such projects.

Regarding the trend of new courses increasing yardage. Hanse doesn't try to maximize yardage on renovation projects but rather honors the work of the original architect.

"If we go in and screw around with their design, they're gone forever," he says.

Another design trend has been the tendency toward faster putting surfaces, but Smyers sees that subsiding.

"Golfers will accept more undulating putting surfaces than even a few years ago," he says.

Pascuzzo suggests attendees encourage a reasonable green speed when planning a new course, saying the bulk of the membership likely favors a slower, more forgiving green.

"Talk about it upfront," he says. "Who's your market? You're not going to get a tour here. You'll mostly want them at nine or 9.5, not 10 or 10.5. I want to challenge the player around the green. If you take that tool out of my toolbox, it's going to dumb down the golf course."

People often want architects to make courses easier to play.

"How much easier can we make it?" Smyers asks. "It's not about making courses easier; it's making them more fun and playable."

When there's new course construction in the U.S., it usually is connected with real estate.

"We haven't had a stand-alone project in seven to eight years," Pascuzzo says.

Another factor that's driving the market and acting as an aid to real estate-linked golf courses is the retirement of baby boomers. There seems to be a trend among this demographic of owning multiple homes, with at least one located on or near a golf course.

"They're looking for the resort lifestyle 24-7," Pascuzzo says.

There also are ways to draw younger people to the game with programs such as The First Tee and Play Golf America. Snowboarding, for example, revolutionized winter sports by bringing attention back to the genre when skiing and other snow sports seemed to be losing popularity, Pascuzzo says.

"Golf needs something like that," he says. "Golf has to compete with a lot more now than it did 20 to 25 years ago, including the Internet, games and other distractions."

Between a wider range of entertainment options, cost and player expectations driving potential golfers away, panelists agree the industry needs to grow the game.

"We can continue to throw ideas out, but we need to work in concert," Pascuzzo says. - HW