Domes on the Rise

Site preparation in advance of dome construction at Salt Creek.

Winter is upon us. I am looking across the golf course watching the deer running around, geese "fertilizing" the turf, golfers trying to play golf and there it is—the dome. This structure that blocks out the sun from reaching the clubhouse and is the center of attention during the winter months—yep, it's a good opportunity to discuss the usefulness of the indoor facility.

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First of all, you need to get over the initial ugliness of the creature. Try to find a spot to hide it; behind trees, low areas, interior of golf courses away from roads or on driving ranges. But after awhile, the dome tends to grow on you and becomes second nature—part of the landscaping (a BIG part). However, domes have pros and cons that make them more or less feasible from a marketability standpoint. Herein, you'll find some insights on domes and their future in the Chicagoland area. My resources include Mike Munro, who has been in the dome business for 11 years at White Pines G.C., and Poplar Creek's Luke Strojny, who in 1999 inherited a dome that had previously spent five years in private ownership.

Let's start with the homework you need to do on the front end: planning and cost analysis. Mike spent five years investigating the Detroit area for ideas and searching for material before finding a site for his dome in the Chicago area. In 1990, Mike erected a dome at White Pines. Here at Salt Creek, our manager was approached by a private firm in 1997 about building a dome on the golf course land. The manager and I went out and conducted our own investigation. I made phone calls to other dome facilities, government agencies and material installers. Location of the dome was our next concern, our options being the edge of the parking lot or the driving range. The edge of the parking lot had too many variables requiring adjustment and construction traffic would have been a mess. So the range was the only site for our dome and even that wasn't an ideal spot. However, six months after the initial meeting with the private firm, a dome was erected at Salt Creek.

Exterior shot of the Salt Creek dome.

Costs start at $1 million and go up from there. Mike Munro's cost was around $1.5 million, including construction, dome fabric, utilities and range supplies. If successful, a dome starts to make a profit during its second or third year of existence. Weather is a factor here at Salt Creek because the course is open during the winter months, weather permitting, which takes revenue away from the dome. Last winter was probably our best because snow fell in December and didn't melt until early February. That was our fourth year of operation; the previous three years, the weather was mild until Christmastime.

The construction phase entails soil samples, surveyors, blueprints, then foundations that are about 2′ wide by 6′ deep around the perimeter of the dome. Domes are usually 300′ long by 225′ wide. Next is installation of the upper and lower tee lines (each 50 stalls), a heater and a blower that requires both electric and gas so in case of power shutdown the dome does not deflate. An airlock door is required so large items can be brought into the dome without causing deflation; this feature helps especially in case of high winds. Finally comes hook-up of utilities: gas, phone, fire alarm, cable. Mike's heating bill for one month was once $30,000—last year's natural gas costs were high. During construction here at Salt Creek, a detention pond had to be built because the dome was displacing water run-off.

Fabric usually comes in about four sections, depending on the structure shell. The shape can approximate a tall tunnel, flat top or high at the tee line and lower down-range. Mike has had to replace his fabric twice. An outside contractor erects the dome each fall and removes it each spring. This process takes a lot of manpower, usually 30-40 temporary workers over a three-day period, according to Luke.

As you plan your dome's interior, decisions to be made include whether the facility is to be a range only or open for softball and soccer as well. Your fire inspector will tell you whether that's an option for you, if

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Inside the golf dome at Salt Creek G.C.

The upper tee line at the Salt Creek golf dome.

the dome is equipped with fire exit doors at all four corners and if there is some kind of structural support to slow the deflation process allowing customers to exit without harm. Watch out for target greens that can't be removed . . . tough to play soccer around them. Installation of synthetic turf for down range with target greens is common. Get different turf that allows backspin for the target greens versus common-area turf. Also available are colored turf to represent water and sand traps. Tee mats are used for the hitting area, but there is a market now for synthetic turf incorporating sand to get the feel of real grass. This could be used year-round. Then, you'll require range supplies like golf balls, tee dividers, ball picker with vehicle, baskets, ball-washing machine and automatic devices to tee up the ball.

The benefits of the dome are having an indoor facility for use during the winter months to keep your golfers busy working on their swings, taking private lessons (and bringing in dollars), and that is a major plus. A dome can be a social place for seniors and gives the snow birds a place to go. If the facility is also used for soccer and softball, that means more revenue and again, social events, especially if run by the park district. The strikes against a dome are the upfront cost of $1 million or more, the unpredictability of the weather and site limitations on location.

Mike Munro thinks the still-hurting economy at present might mean a market saturated for further dome development. Still, park districts and villages continue investing to meet the demands of taxpayers who want to use domes for golf and other activities. Some park districts and villages are limited in providing for their constituents, and a dome may be cheaper to provide than a golf course. Whereas a private firm's interest is primarily the bottom line, park districts and municipalities have community-service interests and revenue sources to offset the costs of a dome. Ultimately, domes are here to stay.

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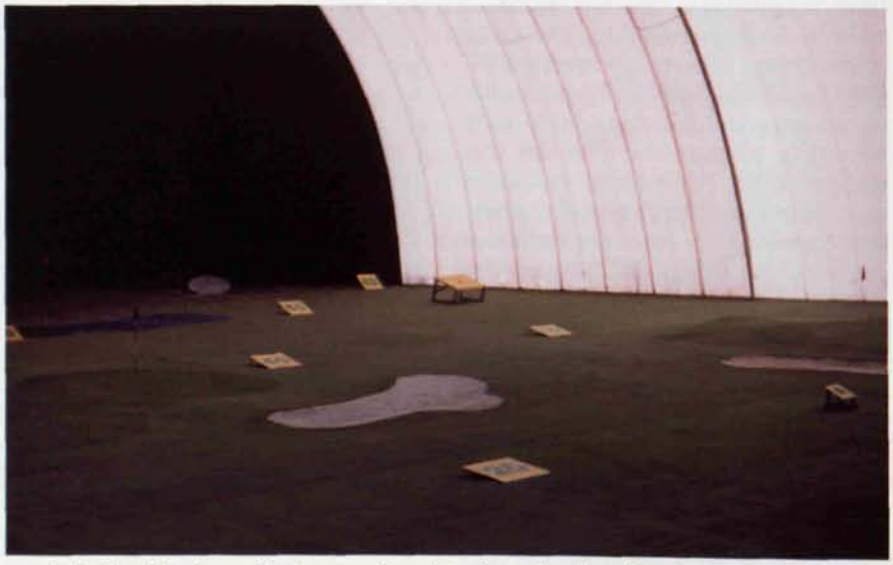

Salt Creek's dome features colored turf to simulate bunkers and water.