

2004 Capitol Hill Visit

Legislators Don't Understand Golf's Role in Economy, Environment

By Joel Jackson, CGCS

Encouraged by our reception and conversations with legislators in Tallahassee last year, the FGCSA officers asked our lobbyist Mike Goldie to schedule another round of visits this year. We went during the legislative session last year, so this year we explored going up during committee-work weeks prior to the session so their schedules wouldn't be so tight.

This year we had a couple of items of concern that we explored with each legislator:

- Six water bills that were on the agenda.
- The upcoming budget and would IFAS again be affected after three years of cuts.
- Legislative funding of turf research. If North Carolina can do it, why can't we?

We talked to the following people: Rep. Dudley Goodlette (R-76, Naples); Sen. Ken Pruitt (R-28, Port St. Lucie), chairman of the appropriations committee; Sen. Paula Dockery (R-15, Lakeland),

member of the agriculture and natural resources committees; Sen. David Aronberg (D-27, Greenacres), whose district runs from Fort Myers to Palm Beach; and Sen. Skip Campbell (D-32, Tamarac) from Broward County. What we discovered in our conversations was that these folks understood that golf was out there, but they didn't always understand how our industry fit into the big picture. Or simply that golf in and of itself was not on their radar screens as having issues that needed addressing.

Rep. Goodlette. On Monday evening, we spent an hour with Rep. Goodlette. If you've ever been to Naples you have undoubtedly seen or passed Goodlette-Frank Road. So Mr. Goodlette is from pioneer family stock. He has seen Collier County grow and understands how important golf is to his part of the state. But like many legislators he doesn't understand how turf research gets funded and when we gave him the examples of the North Carolina legislative support and how we used grass varieties developed exclusively in Georgia, he became very supportive of

improving Florida's efforts to become a leader in turf research.

On Tuesday morning we started the day with a meeting with Steve Rutz, Dennis Howard, Dale Dubberly and Leigh Humphrey of the Dept. of Agriculture and Consumer Services. The topic of chief concern was the status of the arsenic issue as it related to the use of MSMA. They reported that the state and the MAATF were negotiating an agreement on a prospective ground water study to try and determine the exact role, if any, that the application of MSMA is playing in releasing arsenic into the ground water. Our message was that we support decisions and policy based on sound science and that we would cooperate as much as we could in the process. After that session, we began our appointments with four senators.

Senator Pruitt is an advocate for IFAS, but he is frustrated that IFAS doesn't do a better job of taking its message to the people. He encouraged the institution to publicize its contributions to health, wealth and food and environmental safety of the state. He suggested that IFAS hold more open-house tours of its research centers to tout their value to the citizens of the state.

We also broached the subject of direct legislative funding for turf research. We used the example of North Carolina's funding of \$650,000 a year to NC State's turf program. He was supportive and offered some ideas that we will follow up on with Mike Goldie.

Senator Dockery had all sorts of nature photos and plaques on her walls from environmental groups. She was the sponsor of one of the water bills dealing with the mandatory use of effluent water for irrigation, and the first words out of her mouth were... "since golf is a big water user." We quickly dispelled that misconception with our Economic and Environmental Information Kit that we left with each legislator.

Mike eased us into the discussion of the intent of her bill which had exempted golf courses from being forced to hook up to effluent unless it was



From left, FGCSA Lobbyist Mike Goldie with Vice President Joe Pantaleo and President Greg Pheneger during the January 2004 trip to Tallahassee. Photo by Joel Jackson.

technically, practically and economically feasible. It was those interpretations that we zeroed in on. In the course of the conversation she also acknowledged that she couldn't understand the knock against golf courses since she saw so much wildlife on the courses she played during those annual political fundraisers. She also confessed her contribution to her scramble team was as a putter and not much else.

Senator Aronberg is a young lawyer who helped the sugar industry negotiate the Everglades clean-up issue and sugar tax. He comes from a golfing family. He plays, but in truth it isn't a passion right now. When we brought up research funding, he associated us with the recently approved PGA-sponsored license plate for junior golf and asked if we didn't get money from that. We told him that IFAS researchers had to solicit the money for their projects and the private industry and non-profit associations like ours were the major source of funds. He was surprised. After hearing some facts about golf's impact to the state and our long-term support, he said he would help us in any way he could. He was the lone legislator to respond to my thank-you letter that I sent to each of them. Again he pledged his support for our issues.

Senator Campbell is a golf nut. He loves the game. Before we even got down to the business of

our visit, he challenged us to a putting contest in his office. It was a great ice breaker. I have to report that only Greg Pheneger, who hasn't been able to play since his back operation, was the only one to sink a putt to challenge the senator, who holed both of his. Local knowledge I suspect. Senator Campbell was also a sponsor of one of the water bills, and we found out it was a shell bill kept in the wings in case private entities tried to take over water rights without due process. In an area of the state where golf is being heavily scrutinized in the arsenic issue, we have an advocate for golf.

When I attended the Florida Pesticide Review Council meeting the week before our Tallahassee trip, I had the opportunity to meet Rep. Roger Wishner (D-98, Plantation), who is also from the Broward County area. He was the legislative sponsor of the PGA's junior golf license tag. Mike introduced us and filled him on our issues and concerns to give a different view of golf besides playing and growing the game. And a couple of weeks after our trip I attended a Florida Fertilizer and Agrichemical Association meeting in Crystal River. One of the speakers was Sen. Nancy Argenziano (R-3, Crystal River), chairman of the agriculture committee. She's heard of the Environtron Classic. She understands the

importance of agriculture and arranged a tour for freshmen senators who came from urban areas and have no clue about the Number 2 industry in Florida (See *Mark Jarrell's column in this issue*).

There is no doubt in my mind that the professional fact-based meetings that we are conducting on these annual trips to Tallahassee will help us gain support for the issues facing the golf industry. We aren't asking for special treatment or favors. We are providing facts and pledging to work for solutions that will benefit our industry of course, but ones that make sense for everyone.

But Mike Goldie repeatedly tells us that the best way to deliver our message and earn legislative support is at the grass-roots level. Each chapter can work with Mike to arrange a meeting with the senators and representatives that serve their regions. It will carry more weight for a legislator to be among his or her constituents at the local level. Chapters should seriously consider allocating one of their monthly meetings to a meet-your-legislator session. It would be a great time to have a superintendent/manager or club official joint meeting. Find out from Mike the best time of year to hold such a gathering and do your part to improve government relations.

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