

Amick suggests 18 ways to save on course

Golf course architect William Amick of Daytona Beach, Fla., lists 18 ways to save money building a course.

Amick, a member of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, suggests that a developer:

- 1) Lease land for a course on a long-term basis from a government agency, work out creative financing with a private land owner, or receive the land free from a developer who wants fairway frontage without operating a golf course. "Any of these methods will substantially reduce start-up costs," Amick says. "Developers should seriously consider giving enough land to an individual or group to build and operate a course. Government agencies should consider leasing enough land in the above situation."
- 2) Schedule construction to take the shortest possible time and meet the ideal planting season. Time is money, particularly when paying interest before the cash flow begins, he says.
- 3) Carefully pick the best site for the course, to save money on such major

phases as clearing, earth moving, and drainage. "A competent golf course architect should help with this selection," Amick says.

- 4) Have the course designed primarily for its future golfers, not for tournament professionals. He says, "This can mean a shorter, more fun course, with fewer expensive hazards."
- 5) Use the land most efficiently by having a trained golf course architect lay out the holes.
- 6) Consider building an executive or par 3 course to save land, reduce construction costs, and make maintenance dollars go further. "These types of courses can fit the playing abilities of a large portion of golfers," Amick says, "including middle- and high-handicap golfers, women, seniors, young people, beginners, occasional golfers, people with a limited amount of playing time, and those who want to sharpen their iron play or short game."
- 7) If housing will surround the course, have the golf course architect design it in

complete coordination with a site planner.

- 8) Building a moderate rather than over-plush clubhouse — one to fit the needs of the facility — and a few other recreational facilities will permit holding golf fees lower, Amick says.
- 9) Construct as many small tees, fairways and greens as possible, "which will be fair to golfers and handle traffic," he says.
- 10) Use low-profile tees, mounds and bunkers. "This will decrease costly earth moving and, if done properly, can be attractive," he says.
- 11) Make sure that the irrigation system — a big-dollar item — is planned and installed properly.
- 12) Don't clear, plant or maintain parts of the rough away from regular play. Leave these areas natural.
- 13) Add some of the less essential features later, after the course is open and revenue has started coming in. Such features might be car paths, tree planting, and some of the sand traps.

14) Keep the initial expenditure down by building only nine holes at first. A second nine and even other nines should be designed at the same time, but put in as play demands and funds permit.

- 15) Invite only qualified golf course contractors to submit bids, to increase the chances of a good job being done and to obtain realistic low bids.
- 16) If the work will not be contracted with an outside firm, hire someone with experience to supervise construction.
- 17) Construction methods are critical to how the course can be maintained and at what cost. "A knowledgeable golf course architect will study construction alternatives and their influence on annual maintenance budgets," Amick says.
- 18) In any important project, the talents of experts should be used, he says. "In this case start with an outstanding architect. This encourages the best use of construction funds to produce a golf course everyone will be proud of over the life of the facility."

Builders' boom

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Not long ago a man who has operated several public golf courses for decades said only a municipal course could be built today and make money because private individuals have to contend with high interest payments and land costs. And "if you charge a nickel more for a cup of coffee, the public crucifies you."

Behold! Courses are charging more and more, and the golfing public is indeed paying those higher fees.

There are still factors to beware of — from restrictive environmental laws to overloading an area with courses — but circumstances are indeed turning the way of the golf course builder.

"We're looking at several projects right now where a real-estate developer is donating land for a golf course to be built within their housing development," said Michael Beebe, vice president of McCumber Golf.

Rossi points out that around 90 percent of the courses being built today are tied to real estate. And he and others in the industry expect that trend to continue, yet they also see increases in numbers of privately owned and municipal public courses.

Perry Dye, president of the Golf Course Builders Association and of Dye Designs, Inc., said, "We have seen some things in the last four or five years that have changed a lot of minds about whether a golf course (not linked to real-estate development) will pay for itself. Our impression now — with some of these cities dealing with municipal bonds and selling them to build municipal golf courses — is that they have been able to retire the debt and operate at a profit."

"We've seen golf course daily greens fees go from \$8 to \$22 and the cost of building a golf course has not doubled, so definitely what's happened is that the golfer has decided to pay a price that has allowed us to build golf courses."

Dye added, "Yes, we have seen most of the upper-end, more expensive golf courses are attached to real estate, and that's been a very valuable way for us to be able to get the ground to build a golf course. But right now, golf courses will pay for themselves in a lot of populated areas."

Dye also said, "We have people who could never before be able to borrow the money, build a golf course and retire the debt. And that's something that's fairly brand-new to



Don Rossi

the market. There's no doubt there are a lot of people out there who are willing to finance golf courses who were not in the market before because the economics of a golf course purely were not there."

Even when a municipality is not the owner, the land is not donated, or a real-estate development is not involved, golf course developers can find financing.

Rossi of the Builders Association said, "Savings and loans went through a period of scrutinizing golf courses closely because some bad loans had been made. They're not hungry to make loans anymore but they will."

Indeed, based on average costs for new courses supplied by a number of builders to McGraw Hill Inc., the dollar value of golf construction last year totaled about \$400 million in the United States. And all that work was divided up among about 50 contractors.

Dye said that when greens fees at Pebble Beach broke the \$100 barrier "that was a really substantial momentum for the whole industry."

"We're talking now about the No. 1 course now at \$175-\$180 for greens fees," he said. "That's a big money-maker and the effect trickled all the way down to the \$8 greens fee and took it to \$12 and \$14. So when you look at the top of the market and where it's gone for one greens fee and now look at what they can charge in Hawaii and Southern California for one greens fee, it becomes economically feasible to build a course."

McCumber Golf's Beebe said, "The trend is toward upscale public golf courses, as opposed to private country clubs, at developments. They have a high standard of main-

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— Don Rossi

tenance, and a higher greens fee is paid. But if you can offer the public a quality country club-type course, in many places they will pay the \$30 greens fee and it can make operational success.

"We're seeing more and more clients interested in this type of facility... Jones Creek (Golf Course, designed by Rees Jones) in Augusta (Ga.) operates on an upscale public course basis and is a wonderful and successful course."

Still, Rossi warns would-be developers that many variables decide whether a course will be a success.

Location, he said, is the critical factor. "Are you going to have a 12-month season or a nine-month season?" he asked. "Obviously, in the South you have a better chance of making it... That is also why so many ski areas are adding golf courses, so they will have a source of income the year round."

"You must also consider the weather," Rossi said. "In Hawaii they can stay open every day of the year. But in some of the country how many months can people play?"

This is also a reason so many ski areas are building golf courses — to be able to make money 12 months a year to pay the bills.

Vital to the course is the water availability, if it is in an area people want to visit, and how many other courses and golfers are in the vicinity.

And, "the closer you get to a city, the more expensive the land is to buy," Rossi said, "unless you're buying a landfill or condemned land" — and that, too, is being done more often today. In fact, some municipalities are building courses on their old landfills.

Indeed, Joe Jemsek, the dean of golf in Chicago, operating eight courses including the famous Cog Hill and Pine Meadow, insists that unless a builder has the land and doesn't have to borrow millions, "municipalities is the only way you can build a golf course."

"The municipalities pay for it and they get it from the taxpayers; they've got the land and it's for the good of everybody. It's the wave of the future," he said.

Yet Rossi said, "A lot of paperwork is

being done but I don't see any deluge of munis — nor of daily-fee courses. Most are real-estate or resort courses.

"Look at the many courses being built in North Carolina, South Carolina and Florida, but we're not besieged with munis."

According to the National Golf Foundation reports, of the 241 courses being planned or under construction, 24 are municipal, 97 are daily fee, 106 are private and the other 14 are undecided.

Whatever the type course, that translates into hundreds of millions of dollars being spend on courses, a lot of work for builders, and thousands of new jobs for superintendents, club managers, pros and their staffs.

And when looking at NGF figures claiming the need for a new golf course a day for the next 20 years, Dye said, "I don't know of any industry that can double its volume overnight. We may never reach the point where we've saturated the market with overbuilding, and that's pretty unbelievable."

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