

Columbus course boom

Financing varies from private moneys to municipal bonds in Ohio golf course explosion

BY JEFF GROEZINGER

Boom (n) — *What happens when a large demand for a product is met with an insufficient supply, leading a variety of developers, government officials and private individuals to spend large amounts of money to buy and develop large plots of land in order to satisfy a clamoring public.*

While this definition didn't quite come out of Mr. Webster's Dictionary, had the esteemed compiler of words and meanings been in Columbus, Ohio, for the past two years, he may well have seen fit to include this description of "boom" in his book. For it has been over the past two years that Columbus has been the center of a golf course development boom that few areas outside of the Sunbelt and the Southwest have ever seen.

No less than nine golf courses (and an additional nine holes at an existing course) either have been built, are under construction, designed or planned in the last 24 months within a 20-mile radius of Ohio's capital city. The sheer number of courses is notable enough, but adding to the surprising number is the equally surprising variety of development plans bringing these dreams to fruition.

Looking back

Why Columbus? Most notable is the fact that even though Columbus' population has increased from 1 million to 1.5 million over the past 18 years (according to the Chamber of Commerce), not one golf course has been built within the Greater Columbus area.

The subject of a recent Newsweek article picking 10 of America's best cities to live in, Columbus brings a blend of good-paying service-industry employment, fairly low crime rates and rapid population expansion.

Meanwhile, the country's population is aging, and more and more, the older population is finding the less rigorous demands of golf are a pleasant alternative to running up and down a basketball court.

Demand for golf, both public and private, is growing by sheer increases in population



Jeff Groezinger photo

A view from the front left of the 10th green shows the depth of the bunkering. The course is designed by the Kidwell/Hurdzan firm of Columbus.

as well as in percentage of population.

Thus it was just a matter of time before public golf course operators found they were able to increase fees without dramatically affecting a steadily increasing play. Public courses of even marginal quality of design and service have been experiencing a strong demand from area golfers since there are simply not enough facilities to play.

Courses of higher quality are finding one- to two-hour waits virtually every week day. Private clubs that once offered low or no initiation fees have now found that a \$5,000 or \$10,000 fee hasn't shortened a waiting list ranging from eight to 25 years.

Residential developments

Area developers are using many approaches to exploit this pent-up demand, but these methods primarily fall into one of three categories.

Two developers, Planned Communities and the Day Brothers, are following the lead of developers around the country and using top-quality private country clubs as an attraction to their residential developments.

Planned Communities' project, the Lakes Club, is well into its development as nine holes are ready for seeding, the clubhouse foundation has been laid, and the second nine holes are under construction.

The Highland Lakes project represents the highly respected, Columbus-based developing company's first effort at combining residences (Highland Lakes) and golf courses (the Lakes Club) into one community. The company's recent residential projects have been in the upscale market, but having a premier country club as an attraction to prospective residents represents a new marketing tactic.

Former PGA Tour player and Columbus native Ed Sneed was enlisted to design a course that will challenge the better players with its design rather than length. The less-than-brutal yardage is also meant to attract the average player who Planned Communities feels will be the typical member and resident.

The entire development is somewhat unusual in that two adjacent public golf courses and some surrounding property totaling 664 acres (owned by one individual) will become the site of the golf course

and very upscale housing. The first phase of the development will offer approximately 65 lots with prices ranging from a low of \$80,000 to in excess of \$250,000.

The new course will retain none of the original holes, and Planned Communities is funding the entire project with no public debt.

The Day Brothers' development is highlighted by Wedgewood Country Club and is located in Powell, a Northwest Columbus suburb and a five-minute drive from Muirfield Village. Another successful local developer, the company has engaged Robert Trent Jones Jr. to convert the rolling and tree-studded property into a country club capable of attracting real-estate buyers and upscale golfers who are tired of being on waiting lists at clubs that might be inferior in design and amenities.

Though not as far along in construction as Highland Lakes, the Wedgewood project has been designed and plotted, preliminary construction is underway, and residential lots are being offered for sale.

The Wedgewood development will be similar to Highland Lakes in that both communities will feature luxury, single-family residences intertwined with a golf course that will appeal to almost anyone. And both are capitalizing on Columbus' explosive growth to the north, northwest and northeast.

Two other quite similar residential/golf course developments are in the preliminary planning stages.

Awaiting all the various aspects related to putting an entire development together, is a

championship golf course that will become the focal point of the Villages at Rocky Fork, being developed by The Limited CEO Les Wexner. The name most often mentioned as the course's designer is Columbus' Jack Nicklaus.

The Rocky Fork project will feature possibly the most exclusive and expensive residential development in the area, eclipsing even Muirfield Village with homes that will range from \$300,000 to more than \$1 million.

The last of these combination developments was the first one to be announced. Governmental regulations and reluctant neighbors have added many delays to the progress of the project known as Heron Lakes. Jim Fazio has been contracted to design the golf course on a 235-acre site near a major reservoir two miles east of Highland Lakes.

The development, a project of Floridian John Murphy, will feature more than 1,000 luxury single-family residences, but also many cluster homes, with price tags in the range of \$200,000.

Different motivation

Another private club being developed has a different motivating force behind its genesis. The course is actually a product of a membership desiring a new location. The original Winding Hollow Country Club was a nine-hole course built in 1928.

In 1951, the club engaged Robert Trent Jones Sr. to redesign the original nine holes and build another nine. Almost 40 years have seen Columbus expand so much that the rolling course on the city's north side has been squeezed in by primarily low-income housing.

Yearning for a quieter setting, the club's members have sold the course to the city for \$2 million.

The proceeds will be used to build a new, Arthur Hills-designed club near New Albany, a suburb 10 miles east of Columbus.

The course has been designed, center lines of the fairways staked, and as soon as the weather breaks, construction will begin. Estimates call for the club to be opened in 1992, the 500th anniversary of a sailor named Christopher landing on the shores of a new world.

In return, the city will most likely assume operation of the venerable Winding Hollow layout in 1991 or 1992, depending on when the new course is completed. At that time, the city will begin operating what will surely be one of the country's finest municipal facilities.

A new municipal

Along with Winding Hollow, the city is developing another municipal course near the city's east suburb of Pickerington. To be known as Turnberry Golf Club, the course

Summary of Columbus' golf boom

Course	Architect	Type	Funding
The Lakes Club	Ed Sneed	Private/resid.	Private
Heron Lakes	Jim Fazio	Private/resid.	Private
Shamrock	Kidwell/Hurdzan	Public	Private
Arrowhead Lakes	Kidwell/Hurdzan	Public	Private
Winding Hollow	Arthur Hills	Private	Private
Bolton Field	Arthur Hills	Municipal	Government
Wedgewood	R. T. Jones Jr.	Private/resid.	Private
Rocky Fork	Jack Nicklaus	Private/resid.	Private
Bent Tree	Denis Griffiths	Semi-private	Private

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covers all the bases

will be the first new municipal course since Bolton Field Golf Course was built in 1971. Arthur Hills again is the architect of the course which will feature upscale amenities (and green fees) in relation to the other municipal courses in the area.

The final municipal project is the addition of nine holes to Bolton Field Golf Course on the city's far west side. According to Allan McKnight of the Parks and Recreation Department, all that needs to be accomplished is to iron out the clearances needed with the adjoining Bolton Field Airport.

"We're hoping we can get that all accomplished so that construction could begin as early as this fall," said McKnight. Though

no architect has been contracted, preliminary discussions have been held with the Kidwell/Hurdzan firm of Columbus.

A microcosm

With the exception of the Winding Hollow situation, these courses exemplify most new course development in the country today. Typically, most private courses are part of a residential development where the course helps sell lots, and when the lots are all sold, the members sustain the clubs with dues and assessments.

On the public side, some level of government, with its access to bond or tax money, finances public golf courses to benefit the



Jeff Groezinger photo

The main irrigation lake and pump house for Arrowhead Lakes are on the left here, looking

NGF hot spots

Metropolitan Statistical Area	Estimated Number of Golfers	Total Golfers Per 18 Holes
New York, N.Y.	758,113	9,245
Los Angeles-Long Beach, Calif.	817,099	7,895
San Francisco, Calif.	155,678	5,766
El Paso, Texas	44,401	5,224
Chicago, Ill.	759,688	5,168
San Jose, Calif.	138,515	4,947
Anaheim-Santa Ana, Calif.	214,029	4,653
Albuquerque, N.M.	59,658	4,419
Salt Lake City-Ogden, Utah	142,193	4,245
Oakland, Calif.	191,606	4,211
Visalia-Tulare-Porterville, Calif.	28,517	4,074
Wichita, Kan.	59,921	3,995
Fresno, Calif.	57,879	3,992
Miami-Hialeah, Fla.	165,291	3,983
Seattle, Wash.	181,095	3,937
San Antonio, Texas	99,721	3,911
Milwaukee, Wis.	221,263	3,882
Detroit, Mich.	648,139	3,835
Sacramento, Calif.	128,262	3,829
Las Vegas, Nev.	54,824	3,781
Spokane, Wash.	36,884	3,688
Cleveland, Ohio	217,948	3,663
Madison, Wis.	54,495	3,633
Davenport-Rock Island-Moline, Iowa-Ill.	56,124	3,621
Oxnard-Ventura, Calif.	61,113	3,595
St. Louis, Mo.-Ill.	191,929	3,576
Baltimore, Md.	165,809	3,491
Houston, Texas	257,606	3,435
Provo-Orem, Utah	34,302	3,430
McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, Texas	28,756	3,383
Fayetteville, N.C.	26,849	3,356
Cedar Rapids, Iowa	25,009	3,335
Stockton, Calif.	41,610	3,329
Portland, Ore.	124,857	3,286
Denver, Colo.	189,021	3,284
Green Bay, Wis.	29,531	3,281
Racine, Wis.	27,660	3,254
Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minn.-Wis.	341,293	3,235
Springfield, Ill.	24,135	3,218
Dallas, Texas	189,527	3,185
Boulder-Longmont, Colo.	24,937	3,117
Toledo, Ohio	72,300	3,077
Tacoma, Wash.	55,342	3,075
Corpus Christi, Texas	29,138	3,067
Manchester-Nashua, N.H.	32,101	3,057
New Haven-Waterbury-Meriden, Conn.	74,671	3,048
Salem, Ore.	28,239	2,973
Boston-Lawrence-Lowell-Brockton, Mass.	353,427	2,970
San Diego, Calif.	218,000	2,966
Bergen-Passaic, N.J.	91,464	2,950
TOTAL		2,642

According to National Golf Foundation research, these are the 50 areas in the United States with the greatest opportunity for both public and private golf course development. NGF researchers first analyzed all 317 Metropolitan Statistical Areas within the United States, and each MSA was compared in terms of total number of golfers per 18 holes of golf. Researchers then factored in economic and other important variables within the MSAs to reach their final determination. The asterisks denote those areas that are also among the top 25 in the country when MSAs are analyzed in terms of public golf course needs.

area's citizens. The fact that the courses usually make money also enhances their image in city officials' eyes.

Unique developer

An unusual element in Columbus' golf boom is the addition of a third type of developer. This developer is capitalizing on the economics of the golf industry in central Ohio and is using private (or non-public) debt to build public golf courses.

Bill Parker was the first to exploit the under-developed public market in Columbus. Parker, an experienced golf course builder and operator, already owned a fine public course in Cable, Ohio, about 45 miles west of Columbus. He bought 167 acres near Delaware, about 10 miles north of Columbus on which he built a course that was planned to fit in a niche between a high-quality public course and a country club.

As a result, Bent Tree Golf Club features bentgrass tees, fairways and greens, plenty of water and traps, and an enjoyable yet demanding layout.

Designed by Denis Griffiths, Bent Tree was opened last June, becoming the first public golf course to open in the area since Bolton Field. Early reviews of the course were complimentary and play has steadily increased.

Parker's idea is that a high-quality course can ask (and receive) a higher fee. As a result, Bent Tree's fees (which include mandatory car) were \$35 in 1988 and are expected to go to \$39 this year.

Helping finance the course's estimated \$4 million cost was the sale of seven residential lots (five are still available) and 100 10-year memberships which entitle the holder to unlimited fees and cars for the period. These memberships started at \$15,000 and over one-half were sold before the course was finished.

Another public course being built along the lines of Bent Tree is Shamrock Golf Club, located near Wedgewood Golf Club on the northwest side of Columbus. The Day Brothers are again part of the developing team bringing a top-quality public golf course to Columbus.

Shamrock was designed by the Kidwell/Hurdzan firm, and construction has proceeded to the point that, given reasonable weather, the layout will open this summer. Since it was located on 104 acres, a premium will once again be placed on accuracy rather than length.

The higher quality design and amenities will also bring along a higher daily fee estimated to be \$25 (typical fees in the area range from \$9 to \$12) and cars will be mandatory on the weekends.

The third privately developed, public golf course is again being designed by Kidwell/

Hurdzan. Jim Groezinger, who has operated Minerva Lake Golf Course (a privately owned, public course) for 10 years is making the switch from operator to owner as he is developing a nine-hole course and driving range 8 miles north of Columbus.

Called Arrowhead Lakes Golf Club, the course will measure more than 3,200 yards and feature mounding and six lakes to provide all the challenges a golf-hungry public could desire.

When completed, it may be the finest nine-hole course in the area and perhaps go a long way towards removing any negative preconceptions people may have towards nine-hole or executive-length courses.

Ohio's mild winter allowed the crew an opportunity to almost completely install the irrigation system and, given a cooperative spring, the course should be open for play by September.

Long-range plans for Arrowhead include the possible addition of another nine holes depending on land availability and suitability.

Columbus is truly a synopsis of a golf boom, fueled by a strong demand that shows no sign of abating. Private developers and government are coming to the foreground in an effort to satisfy an old marketing axiom with a slightly different twist: "Give the customer what he wants ... a golf course!"

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