

Cities and towns take control of developmental destiny

By HAL PHILLIPS

WILLIAMSBURG, Va.—When the Williamsburg Chamber of Commerce explored the possibility of expanding the region's reputation as a golf destination, it made life easy for the developer.

First, the chamber formed a Golf Course Subcommittee (GCS) within its Economic Development Committee.

Second, the GCS commissioned its own demographic and marketing study, paid for by local business donations and prepared by Charles Less & Co. The study

revealed the Greater Williamsburg area — already home to a pair of high-profile, multi-course resorts: Kingsmill and the Golden Horseshoe — could absorb as many as 10 new stand-alone golf courses: eight daily-fee and two municipals.

"We have plenty of golf courses that will cost you \$100," said Carey Minor, GSC chairman. "We need some that charge \$50 or less. And we need to encourage municipal development."

Third and finally, the chamber made sure developers knew that

only projects compatible with Williamsburg's plans would be accepted. "Hopefully we have planted the seed and they will catch the vision," said Minor.

The results have been "gratifying," said Minor. One stand-alone daily-fee course is already under construction; another is nearly through the permitting stage; and the city of Williamsburg is close to signing off on its first municipal golf course project.

The Williamsburg example dispels the myth that cities and towns interested in developing golf

courses must go the municipal route. Further, while the Williamsburg scenario has been very successful, it is not necessarily uncommon. Municipalities all over the country have grasped the notion that public-access golf development fills a need and makes money—for investors and taxpayers alike.

"I think it's a good idea for cities to take a look at the overall market for golf," said National Golf Foundation Vice President Rick Norton. "Communities, like this one, have asked the question:

'How can we stimulate the market?' That's the right question because communities — especially if they have tourism — need to understand what the opportunities are and which niches need to be filled."

Communities like Williamsburg, Sussex County, N.J., Baltimore County, Md., and Virginia Beach have all pursued this sort of development strategy. Their methodical approach to golf course construction is one reason public course construction is exploding. Of the record 1,064 golf courses that opened between 1991 and 1993, fully 81 percent have been public-access facilities, i.e. daily-fee, municipal or resort.

According to the National Golf Foundation (NGF), 83 percent of golf courses currently under construction are public-access; 74 percent of those in planning are public-access.

Conversely, NGF research shows private golf courses are declining as a percentage of the nation's golf course stock. New construction is down and cash-strapped clubs are forced to go public and semi-private in increasing numbers. Virginia Beach plans to send out request for proposal (RFP) sometime soon

While the number of public-access golf facilities, has risen at unprecedented rates over the past seven years, their diversity — in terms of price — hasn't necessarily followed suit. Niche markets must be identified before they benefit anyone.

The case of Williamsburg provides an excellent example of methodical planning and cooperation to achieve the desired results.

"The chamber asked me to head up this committee a year ago," Minor explained. "All we've done is take what we've got, add to it, and try to expand our tourist trade. We've proceeded in an orderly, progressive manner. We have no desire to be another Myrtle Beach, but we're very close to the Northeast Corridor."

The area is close to Colonial Williamsburg, Busch Gardens and 10,000 hotel rooms, too.

"A developer loves to hear that," said Minor with a laugh. "When a developer comes to town, we will have done a lot of the work for him. The difference is, we make sure the development is marketed to the right type of golfer."

"As far as I'm concerned, if you go about it in a diplomatic way, you're fine. Give them [developers] a mandate and they either accept it or reject it."

Minor and the GSC also walked a fine line with Kingsmill and Golden Horseshoe. Representatives from both resorts were invited to (and attended) all GSC meetings. They were given roles in commissioning the study. And the city continued its strong support of the Anheuser-Busch PGA Tour event held annually at Kingsmill.

"They have different agendas," Minor said. "And we don't want to get into the resort business."

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