

Texas state park project moves forward despite opposition

HOUSTON, Texas — State parks officials will proceed with the \$1 million expansion of Bastrop State Park Golf Course despite a decision by the National Parks Service not to help fund the project.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department had applied for a \$500,000 matching federal grant to expand the nine-hole golf course at Bastrop State Park, about 30 miles east of Austin.

The project garnered little notice until environmentalists rented a billboard to warn residents that \$1 million in tax dollars would be used to expand a golf course.

The Park Service turned down the grant request to the surprise of Texas Park and Wildlife officials, who made it clear the state agency had never indicated any problem with the request.

State Parks Director Ron Holliday said the state still plans to expand the golf course. Officials have pledged the 34-acre expansion at the state park would not affect at least 4,000 acres of the Lost Pines ecosystem and the Houston toad habitat.

The National Park Service however received about 100 petitions with about 2,000 signatures opposing the project.

Shiloh Falls gets OK on 18th hole

WEST SHILOH, Tenn. — All last summer the Marriott's Golf Club at Shiloh Falls near the Shiloh National Military Park had the unusual distinction of being a 17-hole golf course.

The course was missing its signature 15th hole—a dramatic par-3 with a 95-foot drop off from the tee to a green surrounded by water — because of construction delays over environmental violations and concerns over erosion into Pickwick Lake.

Course owners have since paid about \$85,000 in various fines

for failing to obtain proper permits, environmental damage and illegally cutting timber.

However, they were recently given the green light to finish the course and construction is underway, according to David Clark, the course's director of golf.

Clark said the 15th hole will be playable by late May or early June. The course's most striking hole, with a waterfall backdrop, has a 95-foot drop and will play from a maximum length of 180 yards.

Calif. shootout?

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Board of Supervisors, who argued the proposed resort would be a good use of less productive farmland in an area that's trying to pump up its tourist economy.

Willms Ranch, however, is under the Williamson Act contract, which means the owners have agreed to keep the land in agricultural production in exchange for tax breaks. The 10-year contract reduces tax bills by an average of 40 percent. The law was designed to continue taxing farms as farms instead of as potential subdivision land. It aims to keep farmers from succumbing to development pressures in order to meet high tax bills. The contracts essentially allow property to be assessed at current income level. The state then reimburses counties for part of the lost property taxes. The state paid out \$35 million last year to make up for Williamson Act enrollments.

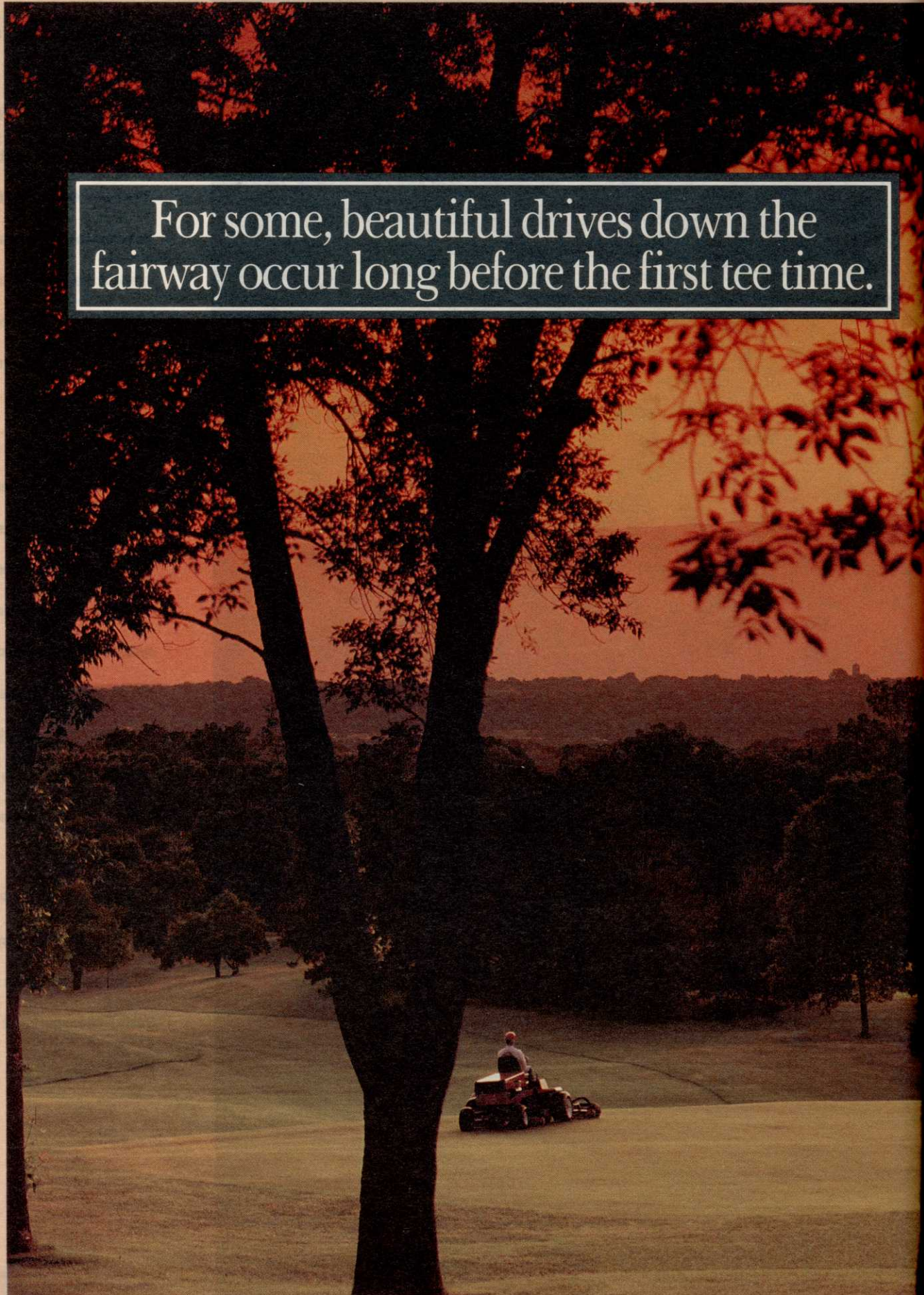
In the past, landowners with Williamson Act contracts who wanted to develop golf courses tried to cancel their contracts, paying hefty fees. Now more and more landowners are trying to argue that golf courses are allowed as a recreational use under the Williamson Act, letting them get other tax breaks and still develop the land.

The lawsuit's petitioners argue that recreational uses on state-protected farmland shouldn't displace agricultural production.

The Willms Ranch case is expected to set precedents for future development proposals on Williamson Act farmland. The case also will shed light on a new law that went into effect Jan. 1 tightening up the definition of what recreational uses are allowed on Williamson Act farmland.

The law doesn't specifically target golf courses, but it bars recreational uses on Williamson Act land that would hamper a farm's long-term productivity or displace the agricultural use of the land. The new legislation was aimed at stopping some of the more adventurous proposals for Williamson Act land, including gravel pits and horse-racing tracks.

The bulk of the Willms property would remain a cattle ranch.



For some, beautiful drives down the fairway occur long before the first tee time.