

# Volunteer golf board boosts bottom line at city courses

By HAL PHILLIPS

MELBOURNE, Fla. — The scene is a familiar one: City faces budget shortfall. City proposes fee hike at its municipal golf courses. City Council is overwhelmed by a flood of angry golfers, many of them elderly, who vocally oppose the rate increase.

Enter a Golf Advisory Board (GAB), like the one created here in 1993, to serve as a deliberative buffer between the municipal golfing community and the City Council. In addition to shielding municipal government from the minutiae of golf course administration, the Melbourne

GAB has taken an activist stance, instituting a green fee hike, installing a tee time reservation system, and proposing a junior golf initiative.

"I was accustomed to standing-room-only fights over any little fee increase," said MaryAnne Kise, director of leisure services for the city of Melbourne. "A lot of towns are leasing their courses out because it can be very expensive to keep them in the proper condition. And the moment they're leased out to management companies, the fees jump sky high... With our advisory board, we've been

able to implement certain measures and remain fiscally sound."

When municipal golf-related issues might confront the Melbourne City Council, they are first filtered through the Golf Advisory Board, which takes the heat and offers the council its recommendations.

"That's the main function," said GAB member Gubi "Sachi" Sachidanandan. "There are seven members on the board, which elects its own chairman. Our recommendations are sent to the council which accepts, rejects or sends them back for more work.

"Council members are looking for votes, and they were under pressure whenever a rise in fees was proposed. All sorts of angry people would show up. We're the buffer."

Melbourne, a city 20 miles south of NASA on the East Coast, boasts a pair of 18-hole golf courses: Harbor City Municipal and Melbourne City Golf Course, which handle a total of 196,000 rounds annually. Superintendent Fred Marshall, formerly the assistant at nearby Sun Tree CC, tends to both tracks with an annual maintenance budget of approximately \$690,000 and capital outlay of \$60,000. Both budgets depend entirely on course revenues, explaining the importance of the ability to increase green fees.

However, the GAB does more than merely deliberate on rate hikes. To wit:

- The GAB recommended the installation of a \$32,000 automatic tee time reservation system from Englewood, Colo.-based Fairway Systems, responding to lines that would form two days ahead of time.

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— MaryAnne Kise, City of Melbourne

The City Council accepted the GAB recommendation, which included an optional \$20 access card, allowing holders to secure a tee time seven days in advance; non-card holders can reserve them five days in advance.

- As a revenue enhancer, the GAB recommended — and the council accepted — mandatory cart use for three and a half hours on Saturday, Sunday and holiday mornings.

- The Melbourne GAB has proposed a comprehensive junior golf program at both courses and a junior fee rate from June to September, allowing kids to play in the afternoon. This initiative is still under consideration.

- The GAB also provided input on the golf staff's recent reorganization, which included the hiring of Rick Shannon, Melbourne's new director of golf.

- In response to complaints regarding slow play, the GAB has proposed a volunteer ranger program expected to be implemented in the fall of 1995.

- Finally, and most controversially, the GAB instituted a \$1 per round surcharge on all season pass-holders, Melbourne residents who have purchased a 12-month, unlimited-play card for \$375 a year.

"All the season pass revenue goes into a general golf fund,"

said Sachidanandan. "But we came to a point where we were covering our expenses... We expect to raise \$196,000 with the surcharge, exclusive of the \$20 tee time access card. My own estimate is closer to \$160,000, but that takes care of the deficit from the year before.

"Also, our projections on the access-card revenues was a little conservative. We may use the leftover cash to update the computer system. We only have 10 telephone lines at this point. No problems yet, but..."

The municipal golf market can become extremely complicated and unwieldy from an administrative standpoint, as elected officials struggle to balance the city's needs with those of its golf courses — an area about which many officials know next to nothing. A few counties, including nearby Broward, have created similar advisory boards, but Melbourne's case is unique for a single municipality.

"Very unique," agreed Kise. "Board members represent the golfing community and have a rapport. So they can say, 'Hey, we do have to raise fees.' Golfers may not believe it unless one of their own comes back and says so."

Kise added that a percentage of board members should be well versed in golf industry matters. Sachidanandan is a perfect example, having served as green chairman and Irrigation Committee chairman at Oswego (N.Y.) Country Club before moving to Melbourne.

"I had to educate myself, and got interested in golf course management," he explained. "The superintendent's job is very important to me... I was the first one to get a USGA agronomist to come to Oswego. In fact, Jim Snow [now director of the Green Section] was the agronomist who came."

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