

State Parks: Public-use issues guard golf's latest frontier

By J. BARRY MOTHEs

Proposals to build golf courses in state parks from New Jersey to Tennessee have stirred up considerable debate inside and outside the golf industry.

Not surprisingly, almost all the proposals have generated heated challenges from organized environmental groups. Though all the proposed courses are public-access, they've drawn criticism from local athletic and recreation groups, everyday park users and even, in some cases, golfers. Many argue that courses are a narrow, exclusionary use of scarce, natural public land that should be reserved for picnicking, walking, hiking, bicycling and other uses.

Some state officials and developers, meanwhile, counter that golf courses can be excellent revenue sources for state parks, especially those that are already struggling because of less funding. In some cases, the proposed golf courses are recommended for land that is essentially unused and would take up relatively little of the total acreage of the parks. Using part of a park for a golf course, goes the argument, might not be such a bad thing if revenues and increased traffic from it allow the rest of the park to survive and thrive.

A quick rundown on some high-profile proposals:

- In Tennessee, the state has signed on with Golf Services Group of Houston to build and operate four Jack Nicklaus-designed 18-hole golf courses at four different state park sites for \$20 million. There has been controversy surrounding at least two of the proposed sites and a citizens' environmental group is fighting in court to stop the entire plan. Current Gov. Don Sundquist, who inherited the proposed project when he took office in January, has been asked — even by some legislators who originally favored the idea — to reject the plan.

- In Maryland, a Nicklaus-designed 18-hole golf course and convention center at Rocky Gap State Park are part of a proposed \$34 million resort intended to revitalize the Western Maryland economy.

- In Texas, state officials are looking to expand a 1930s vintage nine-hole course at Bastrop State Park to 18 holes (the state also operates two other 9-hole courses and one 18-hole track in its 120-park system but has no plans to expand those). A request for a matching \$500,000 federal grant for the proposed \$1 million Bastrop project was turned down and the National Parks Service has indicated the

'Some states have felt that golf is nothing they want to have in their state park system but others don't feel that way. I see Tennessee as a model in a way. They have identified the kind of state park they want in each of their state parks.'

— James Hardy, president
Golf Services Group

expansion would diminish the historical value of the park. But the state recently asked for the grant request to be reinstated and it is under review.

- In Mississippi, the state is getting ready to build an 18-hole public-access golf course in Percy Quin State Park not far from the Mississippi-Louisiana border. An attempt by a local citizens group who favored keeping the park undeveloped was rejected by a local judge. Timber-cutting is expected to start soon.

- In New Jersey, Gov. Christine Whitman is still mulling a highly-anticipated decision on a proposed 18-hole golf course that would be built on largely unused land inside Liberty State Park, one of the most popular access spots to the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. Whitman was supposed to make a decision in January but has moved the deadline forward several times. A decision is expected in the next two months.

Golf course development in state parks is not a new phenomenon. Thirteen states, including Oklahoma, Texas and Alabama, and even Tennessee, have had golf courses inside state parks for decades.

Many of those courses, however, were relatively modest layouts, often with very modest clubhouse facilities — in some cases a snack bar, cash register and bathrooms. The four Texas state park courses, for example, were built during the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s. They offer basic, fast-playing — if nonetheless scenic — golf courses and a small "concession" building where greens fees are handled. These facilities pale in comparison to the acreage, style and budget of most of this latest round of proposals, which are also coming at a time of heightened awareness and sensitivity to land use.

The most ambitious and increasingly volatile situation is in Tennessee, where former Gov. Ned McWhirter signed on to the \$20 million deal with the Golf Services Group in December 1994, just before leaving office.

Almost immediately, residents near the small lakeside Panther Creek State Park in northeast Tennessee, one of the original four sites, strongly opposed the idea. Golf Services has since dropped Panther Creek and Natchez Trace from its original list of four, saying the steep, rocky land was not well-suited under the budget limit. Two new sites under consideration are Tims Ford State Park near Lynchburg and Harrison Bay State Park on Lake Chickamauga outside Chattanooga.

The Tennessee Citizens for Wilderness Planning (TCWP) and the Izaak Walton League are fighting the proposed project on legal and political fronts. A lawsuit filed by the TCWP and the Appalachian Mountain Bike Club to stop the project was recently thrown out of court but will be appealed, according to the TCWP. Further, several state legislators are now asking current Gov. Sundquist to reject the project.

"We simply don't believe it's an appropriate use of our state parks," said Joan Burns of the TCWP, "and many of our members are golfers."

Not all the opposition to golf course development in state parks is solely on environmental grounds. More and more legislators like those in Tennessee where golf courses are proposed have raised questions about how economically successful the golf courses will be. In Tennessee, the state's plan to pay back the \$20 million in bonds depends on revenues at the proposed courses.

Tennessee State Rep. David Coffey, a Republican from Oak Ridge, originally voted to approve the project but now calls it "irrational and an affront to public opinion" in a time of budget-cutting. Coffey is one of a growing number of legislators who've said the state should invoke a cancellation clause in the contract with the golf course developer. State finance officials have said, however, the contract can't be canceled. Another legislator is also reportedly drafting a bill to overturn the bill that created the golf course project in the first place.

Many of these proposed new golf courses, with high-profile and high-priced course designers like Nicklaus, will also demand green fees that could be as much as \$10 to \$20 higher than the average rates at your average state park course. A current bill in the Tennessee legislature would also prevent seniors from playing at the four proposed Nicklaus courses for free on Mondays, as they can at the eight current courses run in state parks.

Despite the clamor around Tennessee, Golf Services President James Hardy, a former PGA Tour player, remained confident that, at least in Tennessee, new golf courses can be a successful, attractive part of the state's park system.

"Some states have felt that golf is nothing they want to have in their state park system but others don't feel that way," said Hardy. "I see Tennessee as a model in a way. They have identified the kind of state park they want in each of their state parks. They have rustic state parks for hiking, nature, birdwatching. They are non-development parks. They have others that are mixed-use areas and then they have parks that are more developed that have things like golf courses, marinas, launches, soccer fields, pools, baseball parks.

"I think that's the best way to do it," Hardy continued. "You have the chance to appeal to everyone. A lot of people see golf as an intrusion and they want to go out and bird-watch and hike and I think that's wonderful. But other people think they should have the chance to go to a state park and go to a marina or play golf."

Warren's Group just took the headaches out of buying sod and sprigs!

100% guaranteed

- ① pricing
- ② availability
- ③ quality and uniformity
- ④ on-time delivery
- ⑤ superior sodding and sprigging services for golf courses and sports fields

Warren's Turf

Warren's Group, Inc.

In Indiana Call: 1 800 954-5577
In Texas Call: 1 800 252-3648
In Northern California Call: 1 800 828-8882
In Southern California Call: 1 800 426-4816



southern turf nurseries

Warren's Group, Inc.

In Georgia Call: 1 800 841-6413
In Virginia Call: 1 800 922-8873
In Hawaii Call: 808 293-1544

100% satisfaction guaranteed. Period!

Call us for more information.