

Virginia Beach seeks full-fledged golf destination status

By PETER BLAIS

VIRGINIA BEACH, Va. — A golf destination waiting to happen is the way many local people view this coastal city. But it is a vision that has remained clouded for many years, much to the frustration of city officials and would-be developers.

The city has been issuing Requests for Proposals (RFPs) to develop municipal property into golf facilities since 1992, but each one has fallen through. Most recently Brassie Golf Corp. pulled out of a 30-year lease arrangement signed in 1994 to build an 18-hole course on the 185-acre West Neck tract.

The city awarded Brassie the

contract to build a Hale Irwin-designed layout back in 1994. But the Tampa, Fla., firm said it chose to abandon Virginia Beach because of the city's announced plans to build five more courses as recommended in a recently completed feasibility study.

Brassie said the city never told the company it planned to build five new courses close to West Neck. The city countered that Brassie knew all along about plans to make the city into a golf destination.

Meanwhile, West Neck and another 1,200 acres of municipal land called Lake Ridge, where the city hopes to build two more courses, lie golf-free. The city is working with Brassie to

reassign the West Neck contract to another developer and is preparing to issue another RFP this spring for a public/private partnership arrangement to develop Lake Ridge.

"There's a lot of frustration, especially among the pro-golf supporters on the City Council," said city Director of Parks and Recreation Susie Walston. "They're very unhappy nothing has been built and very anxious about getting on with plans to make this a golf area. We were hoping to have something under construction by now."

With a local population of 1.5 million within the Hampton Roads area (Virginia Beach, Newport News and Norfolk), an international airport and

the cities of Richmond (1 1/2 hours) and Washington, D.C. (3 hours) within easy driving distance, Virginia Beach would seem an ideal location for more courses. A \$52,000 feasibility study by the accounting firm Pannell, Kerr Forster recommended the city build five high-quality layouts. The study noted:

- There are 51 potential course sites in Virginia Beach, with 18 parcels of 150 or more acres.

- Course construction costs, including clubhouses and other amenities, should run between \$6.5 million and \$10.2 million each.

- Green fees at three of the courses should range from \$35 to \$40 and from \$49 to \$65 on the other two.

- Public/private ventures with the city donating land or making it available at minimal cost is the best way to develop the area.

- Easing zoning and permitting restrictions, extending utilities and making gray water available for irrigation would attract developers.

- Redeveloping existing Red Wing Golf Course near Camp Pendleton would give the city more quality golf holes.

- The city should seek development bids for the Lake Ridge property, already home to a 20,000-seat amphitheater.

- The city should consolidate advertising and promotion through a single Virginia Beach Golf Committee and consider regional alliances from Williamsburg to North Carolina.

"We don't want to be another Myrtle Beach," Walston said. "We see our niche as more of an Ocean City (Md.), Pinehurst (N.C.) or Williamsburg."

But Myrtle Beach might be something worth shooting for, according to Donald Wizeman of International Resort & Golf Resources in Myrtle Beach.

Wizeman, who grew up in Virginia Beach, has helped developers locate golf facilities in Myrtle Beach, southern Virginia and Mississippi. He, like many others, is frustrated with his original hometown's inability to attract golf development. He offered two comparisons between his new and old homes.

- Virginia Beach with a \$5 million advertising budget attracts 997,000 tourists yearly. Myrtle Beach has less than half the annual advertising budget (\$2 million) yet attracts 12 million visitors.

- Virginia Beach's tourist economy doubled from \$250 million annually in 1980 to \$500 million today. Myrtle Beach more than tripled its tourist revenues from \$1.5 billion to \$5 billion during the same time period.

"Many of the courses they have opened in Williamsburg the past few years could have ended up in Virginia Beach if they had tried to develop things properly," Wizeman said.

Walston said she doesn't look at Williamsburg's growth or that of any other area as a missed opportunity for Virginia Beach.

"People ask why this has taken so long," she said. "There's a perception that private development like we're trying to attract can occur faster than public development. But there is still a local process you have to work your way through, especially when you're talking about leasing public land. That takes time."

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