

By J. BARRY MOTHES

SARASOTA, Fla. — A group of 27 Sarasota golf courses continues to battle the Sarasota County government over stormwater runoff assessment bills that have cost some courses as much as \$46,000 per year and in some cases seriously threatened their survival.

The courses, organized as the Suncoast Golf Course Association, say the rates are far too high and unfair when compared to lower rates assessed to other agricultural-related operations in the county like farms, nurseries and pastures. The group has filed two lawsuits over the stormwater assessment issue which are still pending. One challenges the level of the assessment rate. The other seeks a rebate for what the golf courses contend is excess money they have paid in assessment rates for the past two years.

Stormwater runoff assessments became an issue for the Sarasota-area courses starting in 1995 when turf areas became subject to assessments. Prior to that, the courses paid assessments that related only to parking lots and other non-turf areas. The rates, approved by the county's Board of Commissioners, were created in part to help pay the costs of the county's new stormwater system. But many courses received annual stormwater bills that increased anywhere from seven to 20 times. Foxfire Golf Club, a privately-owned 27-hole daily-fee facility, paid \$5,466 in assessments in 1993 but saw its bill jump to \$37,840 in 1995. Municipal golf courses are exempt from the assessments.

The Suncoast Golf Courses Association recently won a concession from the county in the struggle. The county agreed to reduce the annual assessment rate for 1997-98 from .148 to .037, a 75-percent reduction. That reduction could mean a combined \$250,000 reduction in the amount paid by the courses. But Linda Talbot, vice-president and manager of the Foxfire Golf Club and president of the Suncoast Golf Courses Association, said the .037 rate is still too high. The association would like to see the rate go down to at least .0257, a difference that represents thousands of dollars.

"It's still a slap in the face as far as I'm concerned," said Talbot. "It's outrageous. The figures they are getting are so out of whack compared with what agriculture is paying. They're paying 10 percent less than we are. We still have to continue the fight. We're sod farmers in the purest sense of the word... We're being penalized because we allow people to play on the surface

we cultivate."

Talbot said the county's assessment rate, even the recently reduced one, is "not based on scientific facts ... it was a politically expedient thing for them to do to send off the litigation..." She also criticized some of the standards used by the county to develop the rate level for golf courses. She

said cart paths are factored in, for example, as if they were large-scale parking lots. In developing its original rate, the county also stated that it assumed golf courses irrigated at least 3.5 inches a week and that agricultural concerns did not irrigate, both of which proved to be untrue.

Golf courses and government

bodies in several other counties in Florida have been watching the Sarasota stormwater assessment controversy with great interest. Stormwater runoff assessments, like fire and rescue, are what are known as non-ad valorem and are assessed against individual property owners according to the benefits to that particular property.

In Florida, except for certain charter counties, non-ad valorem assessments like the stormwater runoff one may be made by the county without a public vote, which is what happened in Sarasota. The concern of golf courses across the state is that Sarasota County's treatment of privately-owned golf courses could become a pattern in other counties.

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Photographed at Blackwolf Run, Kohler, Wis.