

Richmond First Tee facility receives judicial nod

By MARK LESLIE

RICHMOND, Va. — A judge's stunning reversal of his own decision has paved the way for the Richmond First Tee project to, finally, get under way.

Richmond organizers, who had hoped to open the nation's initial new First Tee facility, had been stalled for months by opponents using legal challenges and appeals to administrative county approvals. Now, it appears, they can proceed.

On Feb. 3, Circuit Court Judge Jack B. Stevens reportedly told a court hearing he had been negligent when ruling that the county could lease land but only if it controls fees and oversees the leasee's operation. That flew in the face of the county-First Tee agreement for the youth-oriented course at Iron Bridge Park. First Tee advocates argued that the decision also appeared incongruent with the current leases the county has in effect with an airport and various other entities.

Now, according to Richmond First Tee Executive Director Tim Merry, it will probably be mid-March to early April before construction can begin at the park which sits outside the city in Chesterfield County.

"We are relieved," he said. "We had hoped this [reversal] would be the case. We are prepared to move ahead. We remain very committed, and look forward to the day when we can have kids out there playing on the golf course."

Local businessmen, led by Fred Tattersall, had raised \$2 million for the facility — \$1.5 million to build it and \$500,000 to operate it for five years, by which time it should be self-sustaining. The goal is to make golf affordable for area children.

Golf course architect Lester George, who is donating his services, and builder Quality Grassing & Services, which will earn no profit on the project, are prepared to get started. Shortly af-

ter Stevens reversed his decision, George submitted a new course routing, eliminating an irrigation pond that was a safety issue for some. And Quality Grassing stood ready to begin clearing, once the new plans were approved by the Chesterfield county commissioners.

Opponents to the project, led

by park neighbors, promised to appeal Stevens' decision. But Merry said: "We're not waiting for the appeal. By the end of February I will have all the permitting we need. Construction could only be held up by a judge granting a restraining order while awaiting appeal."

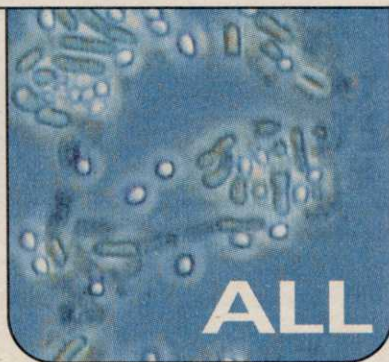
Richmond First Tee support-

ers see the year-long entanglement as a possible blessing in disguise, for two reasons:

- "When we go through it this time around, [national] First Tee is in a much better position to help us, and we're in a better position to do it," Merry said, referring to the fact that a year ago the national program had just been created by the PGA of America, PGA Tour, U.S. Golf Association, LPGA and others.

"Though not the first facility, we'll still have a unique project here," Merry added.

- While the county project was stalled, Richmond First Tee reopened talks with the city of Richmond concerning an inner-city site the city wanted them to build on in the first place. The project would be a three-hole layout next to an existing driving range, with another six holes in the future.



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Pebble's 5th

Continued from page 23

the 7th tee clinging to the rocks. The prevailing winds will swirl into this green complex to help make it a challenging hole.

In order to make the hole blend into the rest of the course, the Pebble Beach maintenance staff has painstakingly created a sod nursery from cores harvested from the course's other greens. The goal is to blend in the new hole so that it feels and plays as though it has always been there.

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