

Golf course architects see more renovations, fewer new projects

As the U.S. experiences a shift in market conditions and demographics, golf course architects have been acclimating to market changes that include more golf course renovation projects and fewer new construction jobs.

This was discussed as the ASGCA hosted a panel at the recent Golf Industry Show in Anaheim, Calif., to share observations of current market trends. The panel included ASGCA associate Gil Hanse, past ASGCA president Damian Pascuzzo and members

Steve Smyers and Doug Carrick.

There was discussion about the latest numbers from NGF, which state there was a net loss of 26 golf courses in the United States in 2006. However, there has been an increase in new golf courses elsewhere, including Europe, the Middle East and South Africa, panelists say.

One of the reasons why golf course closings outpaced openings is the value of the land on which courses lie. During the past seven years, 24 facilities in Myrtle Beach, S.C., closed or



ASGCA members discuss various trends in golf course development.



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have been slated to close, says Greg Muirhead, president of the ASGCA and panel moderator. Land's increasing value has caused several golf course owners to sell their property, he says.

Instead of new course openings, investments are being made to renovate existing courses at private club facilities, says Smyers, who's working on four such projects.

Regarding the trend of new courses increasing yardage, Hanse doesn't try to maximize yardage on renovation projects but rather honors the work of the original architect.

"If we go in and screw around with their design, they're gone forever," he says.

Another design trend has been the tendency toward faster putting surfaces, but Smyers sees that subsiding.

"Golfers will accept more undulating putting surfaces than even a few years ago," he says.

Pascuzzo suggests attendees encourage a reasonable green speed when planning a new course, saying the bulk of the membership likely favors a slower, more forgiving green.

"Talk about it upfront," he says. "Who's your market? You're not going to get a tour here. You'll mostly want them at nine or 9.5, not 10 or 10.5. I want to challenge the player around the green. If you take that tool out of my toolbox, it's going to dumb down the golf course."

People often want architects to make courses easier to play.

"How much easier can we make it?" Smyers asks. "It's not about making courses easier; it's making them more fun and playable."

When there's new course construction in the U.S., it usually is connected with real estate.

"We haven't had a stand-alone project in seven to eight years," Pascuzzo says.

Another factor that's driving the market and acting as an aid to real estate-linked golf courses is the retirement of baby boomers. There seems to be a trend among this demographic of owning multiple homes, with at least one located on or near a golf course.

"They're looking for the resort lifestyle 24-7," Pascuzzo says.

There also are ways to draw younger people to the game with programs such as The First Tee and Play Golf America. Snowboarding, for example, revolutionized winter sports by bringing attention back to the genre when skiing and other snow sports seemed to be losing popularity, Pascuzzo says.

"Golf needs something like that," he says. "Golf has to compete with a lot more now than it did 20 to 25 years ago, including the Internet, games and other distractions."

Between a wider range of entertainment options, cost and player expectations driving potential golfers away, panelists agree the industry needs to grow the game.

"We can continue to throw ideas out, but we need to work in concert," Pascuzzo says. — HW



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Architects say one design trend is toward faster putting surfaces.