

Homeowners fight development plan for ex-golf course

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Oct. 11, 2008, 10:36PM

Merle Bunde looks from his rear porch toward a spreading oak just beyond the low fence marking his property. In his mind's eye he can still see golfers standing on the tee box on the other side of it, whacking balls down the fairway of the first hole.

There are no more golfers. In fact there's no more golf course. What was once Clear Lake Country Club and later Clear Lake Golf Club is now an overgrown field with a vandalized, boarded-up clubhouse at one end and mounds that used to be greens at the other.

The loss of the manicured grass and steady hum of people enjoying it makes Bunde sad. Long retired from IBM, he recalls his son winning the club championship for his age group there. But the proposal for what to do with the land stirs a much deeper emotion.

"There was a meeting with local homeowners where the owner discussed his plan to develop it, and I've never seen anything like it," Bunde said. "There were hundreds of really angry people. I was one of the angry ones."

The 178 acres of green space — still green but now decidedly shaggy — is at the center of a controversy pitting an owner who wants to sell it off in pieces to build houses, condominiums and strip centers against a community that fears what development could do to their property values.

Golf courses close every year, often when sale of the land produces more revenue than the course can generate. The owners of Old Orchard Golf Course in Richmond sold out in 2005 for precisely that reason. But closing courses that wind through residential communities inevitably provokes a fight. Only three weeks after Clear Lake residents learned of the proposed land sale, more than 4,000 had signed petitions opposing it.

The next round in the fight will take place this week in Harris County Court-At-Law No. 1, when a condemnation proceeding brought by the Clear Lake City Water Authority is heard. The authority stepped in after hearing of development plans in 2005, arguing that more concrete and storm runoff is exactly what the area didn't need. Years of construction in the upper portions of the watershed have led to increased flooding problems at the bottom, the authority contends.

No plans to reopen course

Authority officials say they have no precise plans on what to do with the land if they get it. There have been no proposals to reopen the golf course, although redesigning it could incorporate the water authority's aim of detaining more

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runoff. There is talk of using the land for athletic fields and hike and bike trails. But the water district's primary goal is to keep the owner from flipping the property.

Bunde would love to see golfers outside his window again. In any case he does not want to see bulldozers and condos.

"I liked the course, but I had a greater concern," said Bunde, who bought his home in 1965, two years after the course opened. "My house has flooded three times."

Aging residential golf courses present a dilemma not unfamiliar to modern suburbia, or to those who follow golf economics. Sometimes new homeowners are not as interested in joining neighboring private clubs as previous owners. And residential courses that are open to the public often face competition from newer facilities. The National Golf Foundation says 12 percent of the courses that close annually are in residential communities.

'It was strictly a land play'

Renaissance Golf Group, a small company based in Ohio, apparently figured to add three more to the list. It acquired Quail Valley Country Club and Clear Lake Golf Club from Club Corp., a well-known golf course operator, in 2002. Later it purchased the Inwood Forest Country Club.

It did not take long before Quail Valley's new owners were talking about selling the land to developers. Homeowners fought back. Enlisting

the aid of Missouri City officials, they managed to get the property condemned by the city, which then opened it as a public course. Renaissance has appealed the acquisition price of about \$3 million, less than one-third of what the company had hoped to sell the land for.

"They bought three golf courses, and all three they were trying to close and develop," said Charlie Butera, former president of the Quail Valley homeowners' association. "That pretty much told me what type of business they were in. They put very little money into (Quail Valley), did very little to encourage people to join and did little to maintain the members they had. They were telling us how great the (Clear Lake) course was doing. Then they closed it. It was strictly a land play, no doubt about it."

The head of Renaissance, Mark Voltmann, could not be reached for comment. Phone calls to his local attorney were not returned. Voltmann has said that a golf-saturated market made running the courses unprofitable. Clear Lake closed in 2005, and Inwood Forest closed shortly after it was purchased in 2007.

Clear Lake residents are hoping the same tactic used to stop the liquidation of Quail Valley will prevail again. In this case, the water authority, whose domain encompasses 16,000 acres and parts of five cities, wants to take the golf course to build detention ponds to ease floodwater runoff. This week's trial will determine how much it has to pay for the land.

The water authority's decision to condemn the property took pressure off the local civic

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association, which also was fighting any proposed sale. But neither group would have had a great chance were it not for deed restrictions placed on the property by the original builder, Friendswood Development Corp. Those restrictions prevent it from being used as anything but a golf course or recreational facility until 2021. They were passed on to Club Corp. and later to Renaissance, and figured into the purchase price.

Renaissance is fighting to have the deed restrictions removed in order to greatly increase the value of the property. Its separate lawsuit against Exxon, parent company of the original builder, is on hold pending the outcome of the condemnation proceeding. The judge in County Court 1, Jack Cagle, has said jurors in this case must determine a value with the restrictions in place.

Inwood Forest also fighting


In the middle of the fray is John Branch, a leader of the Clear Lake City Green Space Preservation Committee and a board member of the water authority who has spearheaded the effort to acquire the land. He said the two organizations have overlapping goals but that the water authority is not serving as a proxy for homeowners, as Renaissance has claimed.


"I did not look at it from the standpoint of keeping the green space for homeowners," Branch said. "Flood control is what we're responsible for. I think this will be a great win for us and will bring us a recreational amenity."

Renaissance also is going toe-to-toe with residents near the Inwood Forest golf course. They are objecting to the company's efforts to replat the property to accommodate unrestricted redevelopment. The local civic association is reporting record turnouts at its monthly meetings and vows to keep fighting as long as need be.

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