



Rolling Hills Reserve LLC is a Maury L. Carter & Associates, Inc. investor property.

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COMMENTARY



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A Rolling Hills park will cost taxpayers

The sad story of the Rolling Hills golf course, once a community showpiece and now unkempt like a crumpled pair of slacks in the back of a closet, is finally teed up for a happy ending.

Unless you have a problem with fleeing taxpayers.

Then, this ending may not be quite as happy as it seems.

A group of developers bought the shuttered course in Longwood — about 3 miles north of the Altamonte Mall — for \$15 million in June of 2014, and wanted to carve it into housing lots.

Now the developers, who call themselves Rolling Hills Reserve LLC, want the Seminole County Commission to take the land off their hands for \$3.95 million.

What a flip. More than double the original price in just two years' time.

Is that the best deal the county could get for taxpayers?

The contract is slated for a vote at Tuesday's commission meeting.

Commissioner Lee Constantine, who has long supported the county buying the course that dates back to 1926, says the price is too high.

"I'm not against profit, I just think \$3.9 million is outrageous," he said. "If you look at what has happened since [the developers bought the golf course], we had to fight them to cut the grass and even had to change an ordinance to force it on them. And those citizens have lived in real fear that their quality of life is going to be permanently disrupted."

Early on after the course was sold, Rolling Hills homeowners began mowing the fairways and greens themselves because they were so troubled by how bad the course looked once it was no longer being maintained.

The county tightened its code enforcement rules on grass height in 2014, specifically to force the developers to take better care of the course.

Unlike many golf courses, Rolling Hills is situated in front of homes and along the neighborhood's streets — not tucked behind the houses.

And neighbors vehemently protested the idea that the course become a construction zone for new houses, fearing they would lose their own property value once the golf course and its open space views were gone.

Earlier this year, Daryl Carter, one of the property owners, said he would ice plans for new homes and talk to the county about selling the course instead.

"I'm not going to try to push a 2,000-pound boulder up a hill," he told the Sentinel at the time.

Carter did not respond Friday to phone and e-mail messages.

Constantine says the county, which plans to use the course as open park space, shouldn't pay a price based on the developer's earlier plans for a housing development.

"The zoning hasn't changed," he said. "It's them holding these folks hostage and saying, 'If you don't buy at this price, some day we might be able to do what we want to do.'"

Commissioner Carlton Henley happens to live in Rolling Hills and said he won't vote on the matter Tuesday to avoid any potential conflict.

"I would much prefer for us to get it for less," he said. "But they simply are not willing to sell it for less."

He said if the county doesn't buy the land, it could face more than 100 new homes there, which could crowd roads and schools and, because the area is on septic systems in the environmentally sensitive Wekiva River Basin, contribute more pollution.

County officials who support the deal point out that the contract is contingent on the county being able to sell a smaller piece of land set aside for park space in Winter Springs known as Jetta Point.

They also point to an appraisal of the golf course done last year that pegs its value at \$6 million.

But that appraisal is based on the course being turned into homes — a plan the county hasn't approved.

Failing golf courses have increasingly become a burden on local governments that are asked to decide between purchasing them or allowing them to be developed. The city of Oviedo recently agreed to spend about \$5.5 million to buy the Twin Rivers course at just under \$18,000 an acre for 310 acres.

The per acre price of Rolling Hills, which is 97 acres, is far higher at more than \$40,000.

Ultimately, turning the course into a park could make for a happy ending for the neighborhood. But taxpayers first have to swallow the price.

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