

July 6, 2017

Orlando Sentinel



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Contamination complicates plan to buy ex-golf course

By Martin E. Comas Staff Writer

Seminole County's plans to buy the old Rolling Hills golf course and turn it into a public park have hit a rough patch after an environmental report shows several of the old fairways and greens are contaminated with arsenic and other chemicals.

Now county officials are trying to determine whether the contamination is bad enough to prevent turning the 98 acres into an expansive green space where residents could hike on nature trails, spread a blanket on the grass for a picnic or simply toss a ball back and forth.

Officials also are looking at who should pay for any cleanup of chemicals commonly used in fertilizers and pesticides, which they estimate could run as high as \$1.5 million.

"I, for one, feel that the owner is responsible for cleaning up whatever is on that property and not the county and the taxpayers of Seminole County," Commissioner Lee Constantine said.

According to the recent study commissioned by Seminole in advance of finalizing purchase of the property north of the Altamonte Mall, 17 individual spots on the shuttered golf course have been flagged for "above allowable" limits of arsenic.

The study also showed high levels of dieldrin, a now-banned insecticide that was routinely used on golf courses and vegetable farms, near the golf course's maintenance



building off North Street and Blackwood Avenue. That area has since been fenced off.

Sandy Taylor, whose home has overlooked the old 13th fairway for nearly 30 years, said she's not surprised that certain areas of the course are contaminated. But that shouldn't kill the deal, she said.

"It's got to be cleaned up one way or another, so maybe they can work something out," Taylor said. "I would love to have the golf course back. But if that can't happen, then I think they need to preserve this space. We don't need more cars and more buildings in this area."

County officials are working with state environmental officials to find a remediation plan for the property.

"We're not talking about acres and acres of contamination," said Rick Durr, division manager for Seminole's greenways and natural lands division. "But we wouldn't want the public to have any kind of exposure. So we're looking at what's the appropriate solution for these spots. ... What needs to be cleaned up, and how much of it there is. And we don't want to do anything on the cheap."

A likely plan could include designing the park in a way that the contaminated areas would be inaccessible to the public, county officials said.

Seminole is scheduled to close on the property Aug. 22. Representatives for the Rolling Hills Reserve LLC, the property owners, did not respond to requests for comment.

"I am cautiously optimistic that everything will work out in a way that we'll be able to accomplish what we set out to accomplish initially with this project," County Manager Nicole Guillet said.

Built in 1926 and considered the region's premier course in its prime, Rolling Hills closed in 2014 after falling victim to a declining interest in the game. The land — tucked in a high-end neighborhood just south of State Road 434 and east of Interstate 4 near



Longwood — was soon sold for \$1.5 million to a group of investors.

But when the new owners presented plans to build homes on the property, hundreds of nearby residents rallied county commissioners to buy the course and preserve it as green space. In October, county commissioners agreed to purchase the property for just shy of \$4 million and turn it into a park.

“At this particular stage, what we’re talking about is what is the remediation and at what particular point do we make a decision concerning whether we go forward or not based upon whether the owner is going to participate or not participate,” commission

Chairman John Horan said at a recent county meeting. “I think if we decided to walk on the transaction, the owner is stuck with a piece of property that has to be remediated.”

Preliminary plans by Seminole show the old course turned into an area with nature trails, picnic pavilions and bike paths dotted with information kiosks.

Resident Kit Bradshaw, whose home sits near the old 14th fairway, said the county and owner should work on a compromise.

“I wouldn’t have a problem with the county paying for a portion” of the cleanup, she said. “The county is getting a pretty good piece of property here that will be used by everybody. And it’s the last undeveloped piece of property in this area. If you don’t save it, then it’s gone. And you can never get it back.”

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