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Seminole County's purchase of former Rolling Hills golf course nears, to be transformed into public park



An old sign is one of the few remains of the Rolling Hills Golf Club, which closed in 2014. (Sentinel file photo)



By **Martin E. Comas**
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Seminole County officials on Friday will purchase the shuttered Rolling Hills Golf Club property, bringing a long-awaited sense of relief for nearby homeowners and an end to a complicated land deal that took years to complete.

With the \$3.99 million transaction, Seminole will become the third Central Florida government in the past four years to purchase a golf course property to keep new homes from going up on the land.

In the coming months, the county will begin turning the 98 acres of old, weed-filled fairways into a public park nestled in a dense urban area just north of the Altamonte Mall.

“This is going to be a beautiful park in the heart of Seminole County,” said Andrew Kaplan, a Rolling Hills resident whose home sits just yards away from one of the old putting greens. “What we’ve done here is set up for future generations — for future children, my children’s children, anyone who moves to this area — to have a place to go play outside. And that’s what builds a community.”

According to county plans, the property — bordered by Roxboro Road, Palm Springs Drive, North Street and Raymond Avenue — will become a recreational area filled with a picnic pavilion, a dog park, gardens, playgrounds, volleyball courts and crisscrossed with nature trails.

“Our goal is to do it as quickly as we can,” said Richard Durr, division manager for Seminole’s greenways and natural lands division. “But we need to get into those old buildings and decide which ones need to stay and see how much of the old bones we can use.”

Before construction of a new park can start, the county will spend about \$1.5 million to clean portions of the land contaminated over the decades with arsenic and other chemicals commonly used in pesticides and fertilizers spread on golf courses.

Most homeowners have agreed to have their properties assessed more than \$1,000 to pay for the cleanup. In all, 1,160 residential properties in the high-end subdivision each will shell out \$93 to \$185 annually over 15 years. Homes adjacent to the golf course property will pay the higher amount.

The county in October 2016 set aside funds in a reserve account to purchase the property. To make up the cost after the purchase, Seminole plans to sell 46 vacant acres called Jetta Point Park in Winter Springs that the county bought in 2004 with help from a \$1.7 million Florida parks grant to build a sports complex.

However, the county nixed plans to build that complex in 2010 after resident opposition. This month the state Department of Environmental Protection agreed to transfer the state development restrictions on the Jetta Point land to the Rolling Hills property.



However, the county likely will owe the state \$593,000 because the appraised value of the Jetta Point land is roughly \$1.5 million greater than the \$4.8 million appraised value of the Rolling Hills property.

County commissioners agreed to ask the state to waive the \$593,000, arguing that when the county completes the contamination cleanup the Rolling Hills property will gain in value.

“We should ask the state to allow us to re-appraise the property after the remediation,” Commissioner Brenda Carey said. “We should get some credit for that [cleanup].”

Built in 1926, the Rolling Hills golf course was considered one of the region’s premier courses in its prime. But it closed in 2014 because of waning interest in the sport, and the property was sold for \$1.5 million to a group of investors.

Rolling Hills residents, whose homes surround the fairways and greens, became alarmed that their prized open area would soon be replaced with rooftops and driveways. They implored commissioners to buy the land and turn it into a public park.

Commissioner Lee Constantine on Wednesday called Rolling Hills an ideal spot where the public can spread a blanket on the grass for a picnic or toss a ball.

“We have to make this project the very best for all the citizens of Seminole County,” Constantine said. “We really don’t have non-sports-related passive parks in this area. This is a great location for it.”

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