

A bounce back for rolling hills?

Seminole considers old golf course for new county park



A bicyclist uses the cart path on a fairway at the defunct Rolling Hills Golf course. Seminole County is working on a plan to buy the property and turn it into a county park. (Red Huber/staff photographer)

By Martin E. Comas Staff Writer

Sandy Taylor and her neighbors in the Rolling Hills neighborhood near Altamonte Springs finally received a dose of good news after living through a homeowner's dreaded scenario over the past two years.

They learned that Seminole County officials are moving forward with a plan to purchase the closed Rolling Hills Golf Club — which has stood as the centerpiece of their high-end community for decades — and turn the land into a public park.

“Of course, we would love to have the golf course back or at least nine holes of it,” said Taylor, who played nearly every morning on the course until it closed and was sold in July 2014. “But I think most people are happy that it will be something other than construction of homes. We would be very happy with a park. That's the next best thing.”

Hundreds of Rolling Hills residents packed the auditorium of Altamonte Springs Elementary School last week to hear details of the county's plan to acquire the nearly 100 weed-filled acres of the course's old fairways and putting greens that sit just north of the Altamonte Mall. The county also would purchase the club's old clubhouse and swimming pool.

Seminole officials are negotiating with the property owners to purchase the land, county staffers told residents.

“I don't want to create unrealistic expectations,” Joe Abel, Seminole's director of leisure services department, told the crowd. “But we know that this is a perfect spot for a linear park within a neighborhood. ... And this can be a great asset for Seminole County at the end of the day.”

The property has a market value of \$6 million, according to a September appraisal report commissioned by the county.

Daryl M. Carter, one of the property owners, said his group is talking with county officials about a possible sale but could not provide additional details. The group purchased the old Rolling Hills Golf Club with the intent of building houses compatible with the existing homes. But the plan was met with opposition from residents angered at the prospect of losing the green space.

Carter said last week the development plans have been halted.

“We viewed it [new homes] as something that would be positive for the neighborhood,” he said. “But the neighbors have their opinions and would rather see it as open space or a county park. So we're not going to jam it to somebody. I'm not going to try to push a 2,000-pound boulder up a hill. But I think either outcome would be favorable for the community and the county.”

To help fund the Rolling Hills purchase, Seminole is looking to sell 46 vacant acres called Jetta Point Park, bordered by State Road 434 and State Road 417 in Winter Springs, that the county purchased about 10 years ago to build a sports complex.

But the county dropped the idea in 2010 after nearby residents said a sports complex would bring noise, traffic and bright lights.

However, before selling the Jetta Point land to a developer, Seminole would have to receive approval from the state — including Gov. Rick Scott's office — to lift development restrictions because the land was purchased with a \$1.7 million state grant.

Built in 1926, Rolling Hills Golf Club was one of Central Florida's oldest golf courses and a premier course in its heyday. But in recent years, golf courses throughout the country — including many in

Central Florida — have closed and been bulldozed to make way for new homes as owners discover that it makes more financial sense to sell to a developer rather than maintaining fairways and greens at a time of waning interest in the game.

Months after Rolling Hills Golf Club closed, the property became overrun with weeds and knee-high grass. The old clubhouse was marked by graffiti. Joy riders used the old fairways as dirt tracks. Others dumped trash on the property. Deputy sheriffs even arrested a couple suspected of dealing drugs.

Rolling Hills residents called it a nightmare as they watched their property values decline. County Commissioner Carlton Henley, whose home sits near Rolling Hills, called it “a disgrace.”

Now, residents are eager for the golf course to be transformed into a tranquil oasis near an area with heavy traffic and commercial buildings along State Road 434 and Interstate 4.

“I’m hopeful,” said Rae Ann Mauger, who bought a home near the first fairway about 13 years ago. “One of the reasons I bought here was for the green space. And a park would definitely improve the property values.”

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