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City Park thinks elite as it overhauls golf options

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For three long years after the 2005 flood, City Park's golf complex, once New Orleans' main hub for affordable play, resembled a weed-choked Scottish moor, where even a bloodhound would struggle to find a ball.

With the September reopening of the park's North Course, however, golfers on many days have lined up three or four deep on the first tee, waiting to play the flat, workmanlike par-67 course, which still has its share of rough patches.

The course also has brought much-needed revenue to the park -- it cleared, for instance, a \$22,000 profit in January, outpacing a projected loss of \$8,000, its managers say -- even as an ambitious plan for a far more upscale golf complex has marched forward.

If plans from a nonprofit developer, the Bayou District Foundation, are approved -- as now seems quite likely -- the North Course might have a short life.

Plans call for it to be ripped up and replaced by a more upscale course within a few years. And that course would join another, far more expensive course -- being designed with a "championship" event in mind -- to cover a large swath of the park.

The remaking of City Park golf would transform the complex from a low-budget but beloved municipal course into a premium gem of the local golf scene and, its organizers hope, the city's tourism landscape, accessible from downtown hotels in a short cab or streetcar ride.

A round of golf, with cart, at the North Course now costs between \$33 and \$36. The projected fees for the two new courses for Louisiana residents range from \$50 to \$95 on the high-end No. 1 course (par 72, 7,520 yards), and \$40 to \$65 on the No. 2 course (par 72, 7,010 yards), also designed by noted architect Rees Jones. Out-of-state residents would pay higher fees.

That may put City Park in direct competition with the host of the Zurich Classic of New Orleans, the TPC Louisiana in Avondale, both for daily golf traffic and for the privilege of hosting the PGA Tour event.

Officials from both courses have been cautious in commenting on the potential for City Park to usurp the TPC's position as tour host. But Mike Rodrigue -- a key member of the Bayou District Foundation and a longtime member of Fore!Kids, which produces the Zurich Classic -- acknowledges City Park's signature course will be built to handle a PGA Tour event.

"The big picture is we're building a championship course that would be capable of handling anything," Rodrigue said. "We've talked to the PGA of America, and they have given us a commitment to host a club-pro championship event in 2012, 2013.

"We're not going to host a U.S. Open here -- although Rees Jones has been involved in 23 U.S. Open venues and he has a great relationship with the USGA (United States Golf Association)," Rodrigue said.

City Park last hosted a PGA Tour event in 1962.

Not everyone has applauded the move to replace cheap, run-of-the-mill courses with ones of championship quality -- and price. North Course director Don Tillar, of the Billy Casper Management Group, said for every three golfers who have expressed an opinion to him, "two say they would like to see everything remain the same as it was pre-Katrina, and the third is all for the master plan."

A \$24 million first phase of construction could begin by January, with the opening targeted for the fall of 2011. That would include the championship course, \$3.3 million clubhouse, access road to the clubhouse and parking, driving range and maintenance building. The North Course would remain open during construction of phase one, but it would close at the outset of phase two, which includes a second 18-hole golf course, a nine-hole executive course with all par-3 holes, and a First Tee teaching facility, at a cost of \$21.5 million. The park's 36-member Board of Commissioners is expected to vote soon on the plan.

Any City Park move to capture a PGA Tour event remains far in the future, as the TPC Louisiana -- site of this week's Zurich Classic -- last fall locked in a long-term agreement with the state and the PGA Tour to continue as host through at least 2014. Under the new arrangement, the tour will continue to operate and manage TPC Louisiana for the state at least through 2016.

Under the old deal, the state would have paid an estimated \$14.5 million during the next seven years in a "rounds guarantee," basically a payment for rounds never played.

Under terms of the new deal, according to documents obtained by The Times-Picayune, the state is freed from the rounds guarantee, and instead will pay the remainder of the mortgage on the facility of \$9.15 million, realizing a savings over the current arrangement of \$5.5 million during the next seven years and will own the golf course outright.

"This is a better arrangement than the 'rounds guarantee' for both parties," said Doug Thornton, regional vice president for SMG, the group that now oversees the golf course management contract for the state.

"From our standpoint, we were paying millions for rounds that weren't being played. It makes sense for the state to own the leasehold agreement -- the clubhouse, the golf barn, etc. -- because we already owned the land which the golf course occupies under the original agreement.

"It's better for us because the state doesn't have any financial risk going forward. From the TPC standpoint, this deal ensures that the state will have a quality golf operator for the Zurich Classic for the extent of the contract, a PGA Tour-quality golf course that we all can be proud of. Plus, it allows the TPC Louisiana to go forward without being concerned with debt obligations on leaseholding improvements."

State Sen. John A. Alario, D-Westwego -- a prime mover in getting the TPC built in his district and in attracting the Zurich Classic -- said he realized City Park could later make a play for the tour event.

"I think some people would like to see that happen," he said. "Just as the Saints and Hornets would be looking for new facilities somewhere down the line, this is just the way it is in professional sports."

Alario cautioned officials from City Park and the Bayou District Foundation to "do their due diligence," noting "they better have deep pockets."

"Most people who . . . have been going to City Park are used to an inexpensive round of golf," Alario said. "They won't be used to this \$100 round of golf, and I don't know if (the City Park courses) will get enough revenue from it."

The TPC, he said, hasn't produced as much revenue as he and others had hoped. But the new deal will help.

"It's now set up where, eventually if the PGA Tour does leave the TPC Louisiana, it does become part of Bayou Segnette State Park and part of the Audubon Golf Trail. So, there would be quality public golf available on the West Bank, and we'd be happy about that."

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