

New Orleans City Park officials optimistic about championship golf course

Published: Sunday, August 07, 2011, 9:00 AM



By Frank Donze, The Times-Picayune

By most accounts, the ongoing recovery at New Orleans' **City Park** from an estimated \$43 million in damage caused by **Hurricane Katrina** has been remarkable, as beloved attractions return better than ever and flashy, new ones come on line.



Photos by Michael DeMocker, Times-Picayune archive

In 2009, the cart path was slowly being swallowed by nature at the overgrown and wild East and West courses in City Park's golf complex.

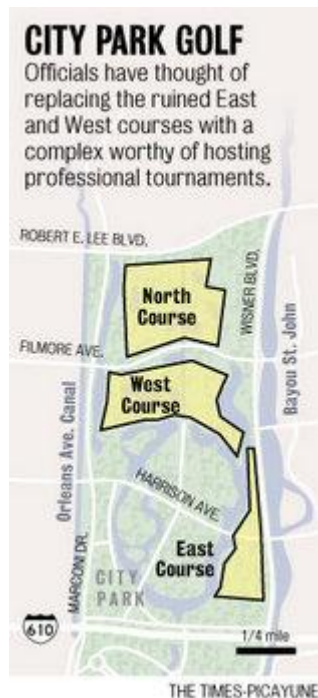
The lone pothole on the park's comeback trail has been the inability of administrators to close a deal with private investors on a proposed championship golf course.

While officials have delivered project after project on time and on budget, the plans for a \$24.5 million development on the site of the shuttered East and West courses remain on the drawing boards.

But as Katrina's sixth anniversary approaches, City Park CEO Bob Becker said he believes good news is finally on the way.

"We feel like we're pretty close to finalizing an agreement," Becker said last week, expressing optimism that the 35-member City Park board of commissioners could consider a contract proposal with the Bayou District Foundation as early as October or November.

Nearly 18 months have passed since the park began negotiating with the New Orleans nonprofit group that wants to build and operate a "high-end," 18-hole course, clubhouse and driving range between Interstate 610 and Filmore Avenue.



A key aspect of the proposal is the promise by Bayou District officials to raise \$8.9 million in private money. Becker said the park is still counting on the foundation to stick to its pledge.

"That's their commitment and we have no reason to believe they can't honor that commitment," Becker said. "But as comfortable as we are, we are as comfortable that we have a fall-back position."

Becker and real estate developer Robert Lupo, the new president of the City Park Improvement Association board, have said the park is prepared to go it alone with its own money if necessary.

City Park has about \$15.5 million in hand - \$5.9 million in FEMA reimbursements and \$9.65 million from the state capital outlay program - for the golf project.

Plan was scaled back

In the spring, the park board scaled back its plan, eliminating a nine-hole course and reducing from 310 acres to 250 acres the space needed for the new, 18-hole layout. Without outside investment, Lupo has said further alterations will be needed until more money can be found.



Egrets and other winged creatures are the only birdies these days on the weedy and overgrown fairways of the East and West courses.

For example, he said, a new clubhouse would be put on the back burner for now, with golf operations for the new course likely housed in temporary trailers. In addition, he said driving-range improvements would be put on hold.

But like Becker, Lupo said he has faith in Bayou District, which has already invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in preliminary design work.

Foundation executives have declined comment on their fund-raising efforts while negotiations continue. On Friday, Bayou District board member Mike Rodrigue said in a written statement that his organization "will fulfill its commitment to the City Park golf partnership in every respect."

'A complicated project'

Beyond finances, Becker said the two sides are trying to hammer out the nuts and bolts of a management agreement with the foundation, including issues such as the revenue split and responsibilities when it comes to operations and equipment.

As for why it's taken so long, Becker said, "This is a complicated project. There are lots of moving parts and pieces."

The opportunity to do the project the right way, he said, is worth the wait.

"We have a chance to build a world-class golf complex and coax the private sector into making a major investment in a public facility," Becker said. "We would be foolish if we didn't take the time to explore this to the nth degree."

Park officials say they haven't been sitting by idly.

Design has been roughed out

Becker said designers have come up with a rough layout of the course, including how it will be graded and how the hole placement will protect existing trees.



A golf ball washer and trash can are one of the few reminders of the former use of the overgrown and wild East and West courses in City Park.

In addition, the state, which controls FEMA dollars earmarked for the project, is expected to release money soon to begin design on the clubhouse.

Becker said the \$200,000 or so needed to do that work represents a wise investment even if a clubhouse is not built immediately. Eventually, he said, the park intends to add the feature even without help from the Bayou District.

While Lupo has declined to discuss details of negotiations, he said the board has made it clear that the 40-year lease Bayou District asked for will have to be reduced. He also said the park is demanding a minimum annual guarantee of about \$1 million in revenue.

In its bid, the foundation also sought 40 percent of the profits from golf operations and a management fee of 4 percent of gross operating revenue. Again, Lupo would not comment on specifics, although he said all financial aspects of the agreement are being "tweaked."

North Course reopened in 2009

Golf activities, traditionally a major revenue source for the cash-strapped park, had been mothballed because of damage from Katrina until September 2009, when the North Course reopened.

While officials have wrestled with the idea of replacing the ruined East and West courses with a complex worthy of hosting professional tournaments, golf activity in the park has climbed steadily.

Last year, the North Course had about 41,000 rounds and with the driving ranges grossed nearly \$1.5 million. The park netted about \$125,000 from golf in 2010.

Consultants estimate that once the entire complex is fully operational, it will gross at least \$4 million annually and net about \$900,000 for the park.

Addressing critics who say talks with Bayou District have dragged on too long, park officials note that it took them three years to reopen the North Course.

"Over and over, we heard we should have opened it long before," Becker said. "But we opened it as fast as we could.

"On this project, we can understand the concern over the length of time. We wish it was shorter. But we decided to do it this way. That's what we've always done. And if it takes little longer, it takes a little longer."

.....

Frank Donze can be reached at fdonze@timespicayune.com or 504.826.3328.

© 2011 NOLA.com. All rights reserved.