



A proposal for renovation of New Orleans' City Park to be modeled closely after Atlanta's East Lake

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Born from the nation's worst natural catastrophe comes a plan to revitalize the public and professional golf landscape in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Modeled closely after the critically acclaimed East Lake community in Atlanta, the Fore!Kids Foundation soon plans to unveil a proposed \$200 million project that would turn the battered and bruised City Park golf complex into a vibrant piece of property and bring the annual PGA Tour event in New Orleans back to its birthplace.

Plans also call for the construction of a 1,000-unit mixed-income housing facility, two 400-pupil charter schools and a YMCA family center near the sprawling, vacant St. Bernard complex in the 7th Ward.

Though Fore!Kids Foundation board chairman Mike Rodrigue refers to the wide-sweeping project as "a slow-moving boat," he said the conceptual design is nearing completion and should be ready to present this month to officials from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, City Park, the city and the state.

Rodrigue said he is confident the project, which will rely heavily on money from private/corporate sectors and foundations and little on public funding, will result in a civic hole-in-one.

"It's always been our long-term vision to bring our PGA Tour event back to the park, and Katrina has just allowed us to fast track it because it has been so heavily damaged," Rodrigue said. "That misfortune has allowed us other opportunities with the habitational and educational sides to make it more of a community concept instead of just a golf project."

"We haven't sat down with anyone to discuss hard numbers yet. We're still waiting on our artistic gentleman. It's purely conceptual at this point."

PGA supports proposal

Rodrigue said the Fore!Kids Foundation has the support of the PGA Tour and the Zurich Financial Services Group, the title sponsor for the PGA Tour event in New Orleans the past two years.

If the project is approved, Rodrigue said he envisions the tournament could be staged at a new, par-72, 7,500-yard championship course at City Park in 2010. Where the tournament will be played in the interim still is to be determined. Negotiations are ongoing with officials from English Turn Golf & Country Club and the TPC of Louisiana.

"We still don't know how that will play out," Rodrigue said. "But the tour is fully supportive of bringing the tournament to the park because it brings business to the event with the revival of the city."

"Plus, the park is only three miles from the CBD and putting the second-largest urban park (1,300 acres) on international TV, in 114 countries worldwide, just adds a complete dynamic to the event."

Tim Crosby, director of tournament affairs for the PGA Tour, said his organization is supportive of the project, although it's "only in the top of the first inning."

"Mike's always been passionate about City Park, and we're very intrigued by the concept," Crosby said. "The fact that it's more than just golf is interesting. The concept is something we would be supportive of, in the sense that it'd be good for the community, it'd be good for golf and what's good for golf is good for us."

"If the project comes together, we'd be able to answer questions with a lot more specificity. But there is some appeal there at least on the surface of it, and it would be something that we would be inclined to support to the extent we could."

#### Modeling East Lake

The vision of Rodrigue and others to upgrade the deteriorating City Park golf complex was spawned long before Hurricane Katrina slammed into New Orleans on Aug. 29 and crippled its levee system, leaving 80 percent of the city under water for several weeks.

That vision sprang to life after the storm left the St. Bernard housing complex and City Park in ruin, uprooting thousands of low-income families and damaging schools and 1,300 acres of prime real estate. Borrowing pages from the East Lake Community rags-to-riches blueprint, Rodrigue and the Fore!Kids Foundation decided to strike.

The East Lake community was developed in the mid-1990s by Atlanta philanthropist Tom Cousins, a businessman who used golf to turn around the city's worst neighborhood, once known as "Little Vietnam."

The concept took root in 1993 when Cousins purchased the near-bankrupt East Lake Golf Club as a commercial venture and turned it into an upscale club catering to the country's sporting elite. It is the same East Lake Golf Club where the legendary Bobby Jones took his first and last golf shots.

The fees are steep -- \$75,000 to join, a suggested \$200,000 donation to the East Lake Community Foundation, and \$10,000 a year membership.

The donation and any excess funds above operating costs go back into the foundation's coffers.

Cousins also built a mixed-income apartment complex where the East Lake Meadows housing complex once stood. He tore down an elementary school and replaced it with the Charles L. Drew Charter School in 2000, the first of its kind in Atlanta, at a cost of \$17.5 million, all but \$1.5 million of it from private sources.

The East Lake Community Foundation also built an 18-hole course at the Villages of East Lake and a junior golf academy that is closely affiliated with Drew Charter School and serves as a key youth development program for East Lake children. The academy is now part of the First Tee Program, a PGA-sponsored program to increase inner-city and minority children's participation in golf. The initial cost of the East Lake project was \$125.6 million.

"Like the East Lake business model, ours is a holistic concept," Rodrigue said. "We're trying to take a leadership role in putting the conceptual design together. But the engine driving this train has been our long-term vision to bring the tournament back to its home at City Park."

The annual PGA Tour stop in New Orleans originated at City Park in 1938 before moving to Lakewood Country Club in 1963, then English Turn in 1989 through 2004. It relocated to the new TPC of Louisiana in 2005 and returned to English Turn this year after Katrina rendered the TPC of Louisiana course unplayable.

Although the proposed championship course would be the signature venue at City Park, plans also call for the construction of a second course approximately 7,000 yards long, a nine-hole executive course linked to a First Tee Learning facility, a modern practice range, a new clubhouse and a sports complex featuring soccer, baseball and softball fields, tennis courts and ample parking.

Rodrigue said approximately \$25 million to \$30 million of the \$200 million is earmarked specifically for the two golf courses, nine-hole executive course/First Tee facility, practice range and clubhouse. The sports complex might be built on the current site of the North Course. A new clubhouse might be centrally located on Harrison Avenue off Marconi Drive, near the heart of the park.

#### Discounts for La. residents

City Park chief executive officer Bob Becker said he is aware of the project but has yet to see the plans or discuss the project in depth with Fore!Kids Foundation officials. He said City Park would delay making costly improvements and competitive enhancements to the crippled golf complex and clubhouse until he knows more about the project.

"I'm anxious to see their proposal just like everyone else," Becker said. "Our board will be looking at the proposal very closely. One of the things central to the issue is how affordable will it be for the average-Joe golfer."

"Rounds in City Park have been declining for the past seven or eight years; consequently revenues have dropped. What happens to golf in the park is extremely important to us because historically it has funded other aspects in the park. How much revenue is generated and how much money flows back into the park, that will be important in the proposal."

James Hunter III, City Park's vice president and golf chairman, agreed.

"We simply weren't in a position before Katrina where we could do much to reinvest in the park," Hunter said. "Of course, the biggest issue is if we do get a major improvement now we have to find a way to maintain it. To me, that's the intriguing thing about Mike Rodrigue's plan. If it could work, it'd be terrific. That would mean sustaining income for the park over the long term."

All courses would be publicly accessible with discounts given to Louisiana residents. Still in the discussion stage, the championship course might be priced at \$145 for out-of-state golfers, \$65 to \$75 for Louisiana residents. The second course might be priced at \$75 for out-of-state golfers and \$30 to \$35 for Louisiana residents.

"It would be nice to have a \$75 or \$80 public golf course that is first class like a Cog Hill," Pinewood Country Club director of golf James Leitz said. "Obviously, we can't give somebody a 100-foot cliff at City Park like they have at Torrey Pines (a public golf course complex in San Diego), but I think they could build a nice golf course. With the trees they have there and with the right architect who can use the existing property, I think it could be first class."

"Any architect could carve his artistry through the property," said Jimmy Headrick, the former director of golf at the Golf Club of New Orleans at Eastover. "Water and trees; it's a great start. I'm not saying it could be a Torrey Pines or Bethpage (in New York) or Brown Deer Park (in Milwaukee), but it could be something that would make us all proud."

Noted golf course architect Rees Jones is on board to design the two 18-hole layouts in collaboration with Shreveport's David Toms, a former LSU All-American, the 2001 PGA Championship winner and the world's ninth-ranked player, who designed Carter Plantation Golf Club in Springfield.

"Whatever green fees we settle on, we envision a 50-percent discount for Louisiana residents," Rodrigue said.

#### Political minefield awaits

Rodrigue said he is optimistic the project will come to fruition, though he said there are numerous twists and turns to negotiate in the months ahead, such as securing the necessary financing, agreeing to a long-term lease with City Park, gaining approval from city, state and federal agencies, putting the project out to public bid and hiring a firm to manage the daily operation.

Rodrigue said the Fore!Kids Foundation has no plans to run the golf complex.

"There's a long way to go, but I have been briefed on it and I think the proposal sounds exciting," state Sen. Edwin Murray (D-New Orleans) said. "I think if the decision-makers who have to make it happen can all get together on the same page, yes, I think it can happen."

Gerry Barousse, president of Monarch Real Estate Advisors Inc. has served as the point man on the project. Along with Rodrigue and Fore!Kids Foundation board member Gary Solomon, president/CEO of Crescent City Bank & Trust, Barousse has worked closely with officials from the East Lake Foundation in the months following Katrina.

One official is Charles Knapp, former executive vice president at Tulane and president at the University of Georgia who has served the past two years as chairman of the East Lake Foundation. A relationship with the New Orleans contingent was forged with the help of Zurich Financial Services' Atlanta-based vice president Charlie Yates, son of the 1938 British Amateur Champion by the same name.

East Lake Golf Club plays host to the annual PGA Tour Championship, an event where the top 30 money-winners on the PGA Tour compete. A second course at the East Lake community is named after the late Charlie Yates, a.k.a. "Georgia's Gentleman Golfer."

"Everything makes a lot of sense, but we're dealing with parties that are not easy to nail down," Barousse said. "We're dealing with City Park, the housing authority and the school system so we can pull all the pieces together while recognizing it's all conceptual at this point."

"We have a park that's two times the size of Central Park. Everybody's vision is to make it something that fits our city like Central Park fits New York City and to provide the many outdoor recreational opportunities. And I think that's the park's vision. I think what we have now is potentially an opportunity to truly allow for public/private partnership to bring in some outside capital and expertise to make these things happen."

Numerous discussions between the Atlanta and New Orleans groups have taken place. On Jan. 19, Cousins and Knapp toured City Park and the St. Bernard complex.

"Fifteen years ago, East Lake had the highest neighborhood crime rate in Atlanta, with the lowest performing school, and it's undergone a complete turnaround," Knapp said. "It's now one of the safer neighborhoods in Atlanta, and the charter school is one of the fastest-improving elementary and middle schools in the state."

"We emphasize to everybody who comes in here -- we have thousands of visitors a year to East Lake -- that you don't have to have a historic golf course. You don't have to have the place where Bobby Jones grew up and died playing golf. We feel strongly enough about the way this community project works that we want to get it to other cities."

Knapp said the role of the East Lake Foundation is to serve in a consultant capacity -- "we're the cheerleaders" -- and to provide technical assistance to the Fore!Kids Foundation.

"The impetus has to come from the host city and from the folks in New Orleans," Knapp said. "But I think their finances are doable at this point. I think they've got a great team in place. And I say

that because a lot of people come to Atlanta and look at this project, and you can kind of tell pretty quickly who's serious about it and who isn't. A lot of people like to look at the old golf club and be dazzled by that. But these folks were serious. I could tell that from the get-go."

Knapp emphasized that the Fore!Kids Foundation should expect to encounter resistance from all sides as it attempts to push forward.

"It's at a very early stage down there," Knapp said. "I've heard the war stories of what we had to go through back in the '90s. They have to be persistent. They really got to want to do this. There are always a lot of financial and bureaucratic roadblocks, and I suspect New Orleans won't be an exception to that."

