



Part of the project involved preserving 1,200 mature trees on the golf course. The trees were incorporated into the new design and protected during construction.

## ***Rebuilding a Municipal Golf Course — Is It Worth It?***

*With good planning and sharing of information, the answer is definitely YES!*

by **JAMES JARRETT** and **PATRICK GROSS**

**E**XPECTATIONS of turf quality are generally low at a municipal golf course. The name of the game is to get as many golfers as possible on the course at an affordable price and gather revenue for the general fund to finance other programs in the city. Who cares if the tees are a bit thin or there are bare spots on the fairways? After all, this isn't the PGA Tour. If everything is humming along just fine, why in the world would anyone ever consider rebuilding a municipal golf course?

The City of Downey, California, faced several challenges with its municipal

golf course, Rio Hondo Country Club, that forced a reevaluation of the standard municipal golf philosophy. The story provides an informative case study on the background and decisions that went into the successful renovation of Downey's municipal golf course.

### **Background**

Rio Hondo Country Club was built in 1928. It was a very popular course, and approximately 110,000 rounds of golf were played annually by the late 1980s. With so much play, turf conditions suffered on the old push-up greens, especially during the summer.

USGA Green Section Turf Advisory Service visit reports going back several years documented many problems, the most serious of which were poorly drained greens and a failing irrigation system. There were other mounting issues to consider, including the safety of people in nearby homes and the opportunity to bring effluent water onto the golf course that would require the construction of lakes for water storage. Conditions continued to get worse each year, and it was certain that the poorly drained greens would suffer even more with effluent water. Given the age of the course and the many





*Safety issues were another factor driving the need for golf course renovation. The new design included more separation between fairways and rerouting in some areas to reduce safety risks.*

problems, changes were necessary to stay competitive over the next 25, 30, or 50 years.

Rio Hondo competes with the average municipal golf course in Southern California, but there is a growing trend in the area for public golf courses that charge \$75 to \$100. Although there are many private courses available, there is nothing that fills the void in between, so a conscious decision was made to develop this municipal golf course to a higher standard and provide some of the amenities that one might find at a private course. The new philosophy was to reduce the amount of play by extending tee time intervals to nine or ten minutes, provide some amenities, and give the golfer a better golfing experience. Hopefully, this change would generate enough revenue to pay for all the great plans that were developed.

### **Doing the Homework and Selling the Plan**

A team was assembled to research the feasibility of renovating the golf course and to investigate various plans and methods for accomplishing this task. Although the city staff had already done a feasibility study, it was important to have an independent third party provide an honest evaluation of the local golf market and finances. Bill Sherman from Golf Realty was hired, and he analyzed the situation to project revenues at various rates and amount of golf play. After the study was completed, the findings were shared with the golf community, Recreation Com-

munity Service Commission, and the city council. Essentially, all the studies indicated that not only was it feasible, but it was highly desirable to renovate the golf course in order to stay competitive over the next 20 to 30 years.

Next, golf course architect Gerald Pirkel was hired, and he began working with the city staff, representatives from the men's and women's golf clubs, the maintenance contractor, golf professional, and liaison from the Recreation Community Service Commission to develop a conceptual plan. Meetings

were held with the city council, Recreation Community Services Commission, golfing groups, community groups, and anyone else who had a potential interest in the project. Models and conceptual drawings were made, information was posted on bulletin boards, newspaper articles were written, and tours of the golf course were organized to inform and publicize the project. Support for the project mounted as people became more informed about the issues. Specific design criteria included separation of fairways to improve safety, preservation of approximately 1,200 mature trees, incorporating lakes for the storage and use of effluent water, continuous cart paths, and providing a challenging course that a golfer could play in 4½ hours.

Then it was time to determine how to approach the project. One option was to pay as you go and renovate three or four holes a year, which would not really improve the overall facility. Furthermore, after renovating the course in bits and pieces over six or seven years, the golfers would not recognize the project as a *new course* and it would be difficult to charge more for green fees. The next option was to renovate nine holes each year over a period of two years. The third option was to close the entire course and get it all done at once. The various plans were discussed with the men's and women's golf clubs, and they offered strong support for closing the course



*The decision was made to sod the tees, greens, and fairways. This was a controversial decision for the city, but sodding allowed the golf course to open five months early. The additional revenue that was generated by opening early easily offset the cost of the sod.*



and getting it done at one time. Surprisingly, the least favorite option in their opinion was to renovate three or four holes each year.

Architectural plans and construction specifications were developed for the golf course in preparation for bid. During this time, the maintenance contractor, functioning as the clerk of the work/quality control specialist, began researching putting green construction materials. Samples of gravel, sand, and organic matter were collected and sent to a physical soils testing laboratory for analysis according to USGA Recommendations for Putting Green Construction. By testing and selecting the materials beforehand, it was possible to assure availability and make all the contractors bid on the same materials to avoid substitutions with inferior materials.

The overall cost of the project was estimated at \$5 million. This included debt service on an existing bond and honoring the contracts for the golf professional and maintenance contractor during the renovation. The city was in a very good position because the golf course was operated on an enterprise funding system for several years and had about \$3 million in reserves. A second bond was acquired to finance the project.

Then it was time to bid the project. A significant amount of time went into researching golf course builders and developing the bid specifications. For a municipality, it was preferred to have one general contractor responsible for the entire project instead of breaking the project down and having several subcontractors. The specifications were developed and advertised, with several builders solicited to bid on the project. Each company had to meet specific qualifications, and the city was obligated to take the lowest qualified bid. Each bid included unit costs so that change orders could be quickly and fairly calculated.

### Construction Begins

The course was closed near the end of September and work began. From the very start of construction, the guiding principle for the project was "do the right thing." Once the decision was made to go forward with the project, the city staff and project team were given the authority and latitude to make changes in the field to improve the project as they saw fit. One example was the decision to sod the golf course. After discussing the topic with the



*Ponds were incorporated into the new design of the golf course for the storage of effluent water.*

entire project team and running the numbers, it was determined that the cost of the sod would be offset by the revenues generated by opening the course five months early. The decision to sod was rather controversial at the time for a municipal golf project, but it was the right decision and enhanced the quality of the overall project.

### Was It Worth It?

The project to rebuild Rio Hondo Country Club was completed five months earlier than projected. Given the fact that the cost of sodding the golf course was offset by the additional revenue, the project came in under budget. The success of the project came down to the good working relationship among the members of the project team. The maintenance contractor, Satsuma Landscape, supervised the construction with additional oversight provided by city staff. The contractor, Wadsworth Construction, also was flexible with change orders and often suggested ways to make the project better, which contributed to the overall quality of the project.

The basic municipal golf operating philosophy of putting the least amount into the course and taking the most

out was challenged and replaced with a goal to provide a top-quality golf experience at Rio Hondo Country Club. The results were overwhelmingly successful. Various factors contributed to this success:

- A good project team that worked well together and had the same goal.
- The city staff did its homework and gathered as much information as possible over several years, which supported the decision to rebuild the golf course.
- The city worked with community groups to provide as much information about the project as possible and get their input and ideas.
- No one tried to force the project. If the community had not supported the project, it would not have been done.

Was it worth it to rebuild a municipal golf course? For the City of Downey, the answer was yes!

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JAMES JARRETT is the Director of Recreation and Parks for the City of Downey, California, and oversees the operation of the city's municipal golf course, Rio Hondo Country Club. PAT GROSS is the Director of the Southwest Region of the USGA Green Section.