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Aurora neighbors buy golf course to preserve their view

By Carlos Illescas
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AURORA — As of today, residents of homes surrounding Heather Ridge Country Club can stop worrying that their scenic golf course will be turned into condominiums and high-rise apartments.

Three years after forming a special district to preserve the view, residents will take ownership of the golf course on East Iliff Avenue near Interstate 225. The group purchased the 90-acre golf course for \$3.1 million and plans to spend another \$1.5 million on improvements.

"I am not aware anyone else in the country has pulled something like this off — forming a metropolitan district from scratch in order to save open space," said Aurora City Councilwoman Molly Market, who aided residents through the special-district process. "I don't think it's been done."

When former Heather Ridge Country Club owner Dick Jorgensen decided he wanted to sell the property four years ago, Errol Rowland and other homeowners surrounding the course feared the worst.

They knew anyone who bought it would develop the golf course into a subdivision that could include high-rise apartments. So they banded together and formed a nonprofit group seeking to preserve the course.

They watched developer after developer — at least 26 in all — show interest in the property. One, who planned to wipe out the sixth fairway, significantly shorten the course and build as many as six high-rise apartment buildings, was willing to pay the \$6 million Jorgensen was asking for the property. But at the last minute, the financing for that project fell through.

Then, in the summer of 2008, Jorgensen committed suicide just as a bank was about to foreclose on his property.

Merchants Mortgage and Trust took ownership. Wanting to sell the property, the bank pitched to developers that up to 3,000 units could be built on the course, many of them rental properties.

So the metropolitan district began in earnest discussions about buying the course.

The 1,127 homeowners who now line the course will pay about \$35 a month in taxes for bonds that are structured to be paid off in 30 years,

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although district members expect them to be paid off much sooner.

cillescas@denverpost.com

"It's been a long journey," Rowland said Monday as he and others drank coffee at the course's clubhouse. "We saw the possibility of having 3,000 new residences here as something we weren't interested in."

As of today, the golf course will be known as the Golf Club at Heather Ridge. And the formerly private course will become public. Officials do not plan to make a profit but earn enough to maintain the course.

They plan a media blitz to let golfers and others know that the course is open to anyone who wants to play. Clinics for kids and non-golfers also are planned.

"This is a jewel in southwest Aurora that needs to be promoted," said Heather Ridge homeowner Pete Traynor.

But more important, homeowners don't have to stay up at night worrying about high-rise buildings blocking their views. Instead, they'll be able to watch geese meander down the fairways or ducks swim in one of the course's many ponds for years to come.

"We might do something in the future, in terms of development, but now we will control it," resident Ray Griffiths said.

Carlos Illescas: 303-954-1175 or

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