



News > Metro Aurora

Neighbors debate fate of Aurora private golf course

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AURORA | The future of the Heather Ridge Country Club is far from certain.

Nearly one year after the death of the Aurora facility's former owner from an apparent suicide, the debate surrounding the ultimate direction of the 90-acre property off of East Iliff Avenue has become more virulent and vocal during the past months. It's an argument that involves the future of the plot — its development, its ownership and its ultimate direction. As some residents are calling for a purchase of the property in order to keep it in local hands, others are expressing concern about the impact of such an expenditure on the local property taxes of residents ill-equipped to handle higher costs.



The Heather Ridge Country Club sign is shown on July 13 near East Iliff Avenue and Xanadu Way in Aurora. (Heather A. Longway/The Aurora Sentinel)

Van Lewis, president of the Heather Ridge South Homeowners' Association and a board member on the Heather Ridge Metropolitan District Number 1, is pursuing a plan that would see surrounding residents purchase the golf course for an estimated price of about \$3.2 million. The property is currently under court-ordered receivership by Denver-based Cordes & Company, and such a purchase would necessitate issuing bonds and imposing a higher property tax for about 1,100 homes in the metro district that encompasses the neighborhoods surrounding the golf course.

"Our mission is to preserve the open space, our quality of life and our real estate values," Lewis said. "We're going to propose to the citizens through a series of educational meetings and have an election to be approved that we buy the golf course for \$3.2 million; it's been verified by a letter of intent."

Lewis said that getting the golf course under the ownership of surrounding residents would ultimately prevent commercial development and encroachment onto the golf course site. Specifically, the push is a response by stated plans by the property's current owner, Merchant Mortgage and Trust Bank, to add residential development to portions of the front green.

But other residents have objected to the prospect, questioning the reasoning behind the proposed purchase and pointing to the higher costs that would result from issuing bonds.

Richard Doby, president of the Fairway 16 Homeowners' Association, which represents 116 residents, says that supporters of the golf course purchase have not provided enough facts or specifics.

While the price tag of \$3.2 million has been floated for the golf course itself, Doby points out that questions remain about the cost of refurbishing the course's clubhouse, a project that could mean millions of extra dollars.

What's more, Doby and other opponents of purchasing the property have questioned the long-term impact of such a purchase, and have expressed concerns about the financial burden for low-income senior residents.

"We're in the throes of not only trying to gather information, but trying to make our homeowners aware of the fact that we have special concerns for the at-risk seniors," Doby said. "The proposal which the metro

district is putting forward would increase significantly the taxes of homeowners, would impose debt on them, might impose significant other debt on the homeowners just from the standpoint of trying to provide maintenance to the golf course.”

But Lewis says that cost associated with the purchase wouldn't be overly onerous for residents.

“We anticipate the monthly cost is going to be approximately \$35; that will be paid in the homeowner's property taxes. I figure that the average home price in here is probably \$125,000,” Lewis said.

What's more, Lewis says preserving the area's open space would help maintain the area's property values. It's a contention supported by Councilwoman Molly Markert, who represents the city's fourth ward, where the course is located.

“My job is to protect the property values of the people I represent,” Markert said. “(Heather Ridge) is the best view of the city in the metro area. Why do we want to put up a three-story building? Why do we want to waste the space on more tacky-tacky, ordinary units that do not showcase what the future of the city should look like?”

Lewis said the next step in the process is to hold informational meetings for the metro district's residents, and ultimately hold a vote about whether or not to move forward with the purchase.

“That's what we're authorized to do in our charter. (It will) depend on the majority vote of whomever attends the election. We're mailing out ballots the first of August to each property owner,” Lewis said. “If we prevail, there are two other contingencies: we have to get the bonds and inspect the property ... to certify what we're buying.”

But the format of the vote, planned for Aug. 15, has been another object of debate for local residents. Doby said that the vote shouldn't just depend on who is able to physically show up on Aug. 15.

“We're terribly concerned about the possibility of disenfranchising voters, and particularly at-risk seniors,” Doby said. “We've got folks that live out of state, I'm sure, outside of the metropolitan district. We've got at-risk seniors who don't have the ability to show up. We'd prefer an open vote — to see mail-in ballots.”

Lewis said that no decisions regarding the election nor the purchase were finalized, but he added that gaining control of the property should be a priority for the area's residents.

“I just want to point out that it's not a done deal before we cover those issues,” Lewis said. “Our belief is that we're never going to resolve this golf course/open space ... until we own it.”

“Ownership will drive what's done with it, so that if we can buy the golf course, run it to our specs, then I think we can have an asset that we can later on sell,” Lewis added. “We're just starting on this, saying why we should buy the open space and control it.”