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## Rolling Hills residents may fund cleanup

By **Martin E. Comas** Staff Writer

Like many of her neighbors, Laura Perry and her husband bought their home in Seminole County's Rolling Hills neighborhood because they were able to look out their windows and see the wide open space of the golf course's greens and fairways.

Since the Rolling Hills Golf Club closed in 2014, she and other residents have anxiously waited for the county to move forward on a plan to buy the land and turn the 100 acres into a nature park — keeping the shuttered golf course from being turned into a residential development.

But the plan hit a rough patch recently when several of the old fairways and greens were found to be contaminated with arsenic and other chemicals. Without a source to pay for what could be a \$1.5 million cleanup, Seminole is considering passing the cost on to residents who live nearby through a special taxing district.

"I would much rather spend a few hundred dollars a year and have a park here than have homes," Perry said. "If that is the only way the county can purchase the land, then I'm totally for it. ... I don't want this deal to fall apart."

Known as a municipal service benefit unit, the special taxing district is commonly used by counties to fund services in specific areas — such as garbage collection, building neighborhood walls or environmental cleanups.

The idea is that residents within that area pay for the project, rather than all of a county's taxpayers.

Seminole, for example, has 435 such taxing districts, of which 400 are used to pay for neighborhood street lights. The county recently created a special taxing district covering hundreds of homes around Lake Howell to clear hydrilla and other harmful vegetation from the water body.

Seminole staffers would start the process for Rolling Hills by establishing the parameters of the taxing district around the old golf course and determining assessment amounts for each home. It's likely properties adjacent to the golf course would pay more than those farther away, officials said.

The county would then mail out petitions with details about the proposed assessments to property owners. If 65 percent of the property owners agree with creating a taxing district, county commissioners would vote on whether to establish it.

The process for Rolling Hills could take at least 120 days, officials said.



“I think most residents won’t have a problem at all,” said Linda Copeland, who has lived in Rolling Hills for 45 years. “Most residents are really anxious to have a park and if that’s the only way the cleanup can be funded ....”

Built in 1926 and considered Central Florida’s premier course in its prime, Rolling Hills closed in 2014 after falling victim to a declining interest in golf. The property — tucked within a high-end wooded neighborhood just south of State Road 434 and east of Interstate 4 near Longwood — was soon sold for \$1.5 million to a group of investors called Rolling Hills LLC.

When the new owners presented plans to build homes on the property, hundreds of Rolling Hills residents rallied county commissioners to buy the course and turn it into green space.

Commissioners agreed to purchase it for \$3.95 million in October 2016. However, the county has asked to extend the closing date several times.

Last week, representatives for Rolling Hills LLC agreed to another 30-day extension to give county staffers time to study forming a taxing district to clean the site, which would be a place for residents to hike on nature trails, enjoy picnics or simply toss balls.

“Our goal is to create a win-win-win for everyone,” said Daryl Carter, a managing partner of Rolling Hills LLC. “A win for the citizens, a win for the county and a win for us.”

Like Rolling Hills residents, he said his group is also eager for the sale to be finalized.

“Something needs to be done there that is beneficial to the residents and to the county,” Carter said. “But we are out of patience. We are out of time. It’s time to get something done.”

However, Commissioner Lee Constantine said residents shouldn’t be on the hook for cleaning up the contamination.

“I’m thankful the residents are willing to do this and step up to the plate,” he said. “However, ultimately, the sellers have signed a contract in which, by state law, they are responsible for the cleaning up [of] the environmental impacts, and they should do it. They should be responsible, not the citizens.”

Still, Kit Bradshaw, who has lived in Rolling Hills for eight years, is tired of waiting.

“It’s time for the County Commission to get it done,” she said. “It’s time to turn it into a park.”

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