

St. Johns Golf Club Course Study

Overview

The St. Johns Golf Club in southern St. Johns County, Florida, is a model project for publicly accessible golf, transforming a busy but aging 33-year-old county-owned course into a “traditional throwback” design via a complete renovation. The course is scheduled to reopen in late 2022.

The course sits amid the 550-home Cypress Lakes subdivision 2 miles west of Interstate 95 at State Road 207 and approximately 10 miles west of historic downtown St. Augustine, Florida (4900 Cypress Links Blvd., Elkton, Fla., 32033). St. Johns County is one county south of Jacksonville in Northeast Florida.

Golf course architect Erik Larsen teamed with longtime St. Johns Golf Club Director of Golf Wes Tucker, course staff, county officials and Wadsworth Golf Construction Company of Plainfield, Ill., to renovate and rebuild the course. A combination of county funding, architectural ingenuity and green/open space utilization make the project unique in the public golf sector. Groundbreaking was held in early January 2022 in the 11-month project.

The course was originally designed from potato farmland as a county-owned 18 holes in 1987 by course architect Robert Walker and opened in 1989. A nine-hole addition and First Tee golf facility were added by Walker in 2001 to create a 27-hole course that drew as many as 70,000 rounds one year. Eventually, nine holes closed in 2011, a result of declining rounds and cash flow during the housing bubble.

In addition to its robust amount of public play, the course began hosting the St. Augustine Amateur in 2004, with a variety of regional, national and international high-level amateur golfers participating late in the year via invitation, application or qualification. The tournament is scheduled to return in late 2023 with the St. Augustine Women’s Amateur debuting at a similar time.

Renovation necessary, “traditional throwback” idea born

With course infrastructure in need of an overhaul to maintain a proper playing surface and to correct massive drainage issues on course and for residents, Tucker and St. Johns County government officials began to assess their options in the 2010s to bring the course back to life. In November 2015, Larsen contracted with the county to consult on a master plan and to provide architectural design services, just as his work at Atlantic Beach Country Club was winding down.

Plans ramped up the next few years with Larsen and Tucker brainstorming old-school design principles by taking three old holes and changing others drastically to produce new routing.

The par-71 course has the look of early 1900s iconic architects Seth Raynor and C.B. Macdonald, including wider fairways, unique green designs in places such as Biarritz (three-

separate tiers; think “rollercoaster”), Punchbowl (green sides funnel the ball to the center) and Redan (tilted severely from right to left) and low maintenance “coffin” bunkers (rectangular in shape) throughout the layout that is more reminiscent of century-old courses in the Northeastern United States or UK.

The nines were flip-flopped so there is better starting hole access to the right of the practice range and a better turn experience. The course has nine par 4s, five par 3s and four par 5s. A new irrigation system and pump station were also added.

The course is made up of TifEagle bermudagrass greens and Zoysia bunker faces. The course will play to par 71 and vary from a maximum of 7,009 yards from the championship tees to 4,803 yards at the shortest tees.

An enlarged short-game area with three target greens and multiple chipping spaces was created – a “wee links” feel to the new design. The putting green was enlarged and designed as a square to fit the course style. The driving range and holes 9, 10 and 18 were situated much closer to the clubhouse to form a social hub. Approximately \$1 million was included in the budget to renovate the cart barn and clubhouse, with a refurbished back deck in place to view finishing play near the Late Risers Bar & Grille. The clubhouse and cart barn work were performed by DiMare Construction of St. Augustine.

Growth concerns

County residents have been critical over the last few years about rapid growth and development in the county, particularly the deterioration of green space, open spaces and recreational opportunities amid traffic buildup. Preserving a rural yet attractive environment prevails among St. Johns County residents, many of whom work or commute to Jacksonville and St. Augustine and travel frequently two hours southwest to Orlando. Partial-year residents, spending the winter months in Northeast Florida from their primary residences in the Northeast or Midwest, are also insistent on retaining the county’s rural characteristics.

St. Johns County is one of the fastest growing counties in Florida and nationally (40 percent larger in the last decade, according to the U.S. Census Report), annually has the top-rated schools in Florida and has been deemed the healthiest county in Florida over the past decade – all attributes that require a public golf course at a reasonable rate amid mostly private and higher-priced green fee courses.

St. Johns County funding

After weighing and turning down developers’ offers for the fallow golf course land, the county opted in 2021 to fund an \$8-million renovation, drawing money from various resources that did not impact residents’ general ad valorem taxes.

Joy Andrews, the St. Johns County Deputy County Administrator and Director of Economic Development, broke down the funding in August 2022:

- Park Impact Fees Zone D: \$250,000
- Transportation Trust Fund: \$458,125
- Utility Fund: \$100,000
- Tourist Development Fund: \$2,455,000
- General Fund: \$4,682,067

Total: \$7,945,192

The justification of the transportation trust, utility and TDT funds included:

- Transportation – project includes stormwater infrastructure improvements; drainage system covers neighborhood and golf course.
- Utilities – eligible to fund the irrigation pumps.
- TDF – 53% of play is non-resident including 33% out of state and 20% out of county.

The total construction cost also included 20% for contingency.

Andrews called the course an “integral part of our Parks and Recreation system, which is intended to serve our diversified population of all ages and levels of their ability to afford.”

She also noted that “the cost of maintenance had reached a tipping point with aged infrastructure to a point it was not going to be financially sustainable without significant capital improvement. This project will bring the maintenance cost down to keep the facility on the financial track.”

Green fees were almost modestly increased in August 2022, at approximately 15%. The St. Johns County Commission considered the guiding “affordable golf” mantra in determining the pricing: from \$25 for afternoon walkers to \$44.50 for peak season with a shared golf cart for St. Johns County residents; a \$25-\$49.50 range for Florida residents; and a \$25-\$59.50 range for out-of-state visitors. Annual passes are also available. Various player groups are also organized throughout the week for participation.

Visit www.sjgc.com for more information.

Results and Lessons

- Public golf: Counties and municipalities that own courses should consider how to take advantage of the open space with golf or “fun golf” (short courses, less than 18 holes, etc.) instead of developing the space with housing. Considerations for how to finance golf course renewal via development on a portion of the property could be carried out, as seen at Larsen’s Atlantic Beach Country Club work, or for future considerations at St. Johns Golf Club.
- Course design: Inventive course architectural styles, such as Larsen and Tucker implemented at St. Johns Golf Club, create more interest and are of similar cost to generic design ideas. The interesting design pieces will attract increased play and cost less from a maintenance perspective.
- Future usage: St. Johns County will use the excess 80 acres to build a new fire station and sheriff’s substation and establish undetermined amenities in a growing southern expanse of county that was previously mostly open land. The extra land use could range from partial

development, non-golf to amenities that bolster the golf experience and create open spaces for enjoyment whether visitors are core or casual golfers, non-golfers being introduced to the game or just outdoor enthusiasts.

- Course playing data: As a county-owned facility in a tourism-oriented area, St. Johns Golf Club made sure to document the origin of its consumers. More than half of St. Johns' golfers hailed from out of the county (33% out of state and 20% out of St. Johns County) in 2021, providing data to government authorities who desire to attract visitors. As online tee time systems become the dominant way to book tee times, this type of data is becoming more readily available. Any public or resort facility, whether in a tourist destination or not, could benefit from gathering this data, which could enact multiple grant or funding opportunities or simply express the value of the golf course to government officials.
- Drainage: Approximately 30 days per year were previously lost at St. Johns Golf Club to wet conditions, and improved drainage will bring that down considerably and upgrade resident water runoff. Unseen improvements such as underground drainage are the cornerstone of improved golf and turfgrass quality.
- Drainage solution: An example is the 15th hole at St. Johns GC, which was previously a rudimentary par 4 with drainage problems among mounds down the right-hand side adjacent to the entry road and resident water problems in back yards down the left-hand side. The right-hand side was dredged for a pond and the mounding was eliminated to create a dramatic course view when entering the property. The pond work gained valuable dirt for dispersal on many holes, in back yards on the other side of the 15th fairway and to raise the level of the practice facility. The green was transformed into a Punchbowl green, changing the hole into one of the memorable holes on the course as the result of needed infrastructure work.
- More play opportunities: As the result of drainage maintenance, the course will accommodate tournaments and outings, especially in often rainy summer months in Florida. This should increase annual rounds back to its peak a decade ago.
- The National Golf Foundation estimates that 80% of course work nationally in the past five years has been renovations with a total investment of more than \$9 billion. The COVID-19 pandemic's effect on courses to offer safe, outdoor recreation created more play and a financial boon that most courses are taking advantage of.

Quotes:

“This course is one of the real jewels of St. Johns County. It's a wonderful amenity and the public has demonstrated that, with about 35 percent of the rounds coming from out of the county. We were able to fund this not from the general ad valorem tax that affect homeowners, but to utilize the 7 million visitors per year that we see here. As a commissioner, I would be irresponsible to walk away from this golf course.”

- Henry Dean, the chair of the St. Johns County Commission

“Golf is all about social interaction. And when you bring golf close to the clubhouse, people interact even more.”

- Erik Larsen

“We kept talking about the design and that’s what Erik and I liked. I like simple, the way CB Macdonald built big golf courses and Seth Raynor’s work was a little more playable probably. We started with a land plan and feasibility study, and it wasn’t until the third or fourth year that we started talking about the course and design plans and what I thought the public wanted to see and the playability of the course. Erik did his research and indicated he loved that style. It’s all the same – the cost – it’s just how you shaped the dirt. I know I have talked to about 50 people who are leaders in the golf industry and golf influencers and told them and showed them what we’re planning. They all said, ‘This is a winner.’ ”

- Wes Tucker, St. Johns GC Director of Golf