

Fallbrook Golf Course to shut down

Course maintenance to end the next day as owner moves to cut losses

By Bob Pickard | 3:10 p.m. March 9, 2016

FALLBROOK — Monday will be the last day of play on the Fallbrook Golf Course, the property owner said this week, even as neighbors vowed to continue their fight to save the 56-year-old venue.

Jack Lamberson, whose Lamberson Family Trust is the sole stockholder in the company that owns the 116-acre Gird Valley property, said maintenance and watering will end Tuesday until the future of the course is determined.

"I'm not doing this out of spite," said Lamberson, who has been butting heads with a citizens' group called Save the Fallbrook Golf Course. "I'm shutting it down because club revenue has fallen so much."

Course revenue has sunk to about \$500 a day, he said, which barely covers the cost of his ground crew. "I can't even think about keeping it open anymore," he said.

Players and others who live near the course blame Lamberson for its problems.

Teresa Platt, a founder of the citizens group, says Lamberson is trying to drive away business by skimping on maintenance and threatening to shut down the course. Last month he announced he was shutting down the back nine, but reopened it after just one day.

"He basically wants us all to disappear so he can sell his property to developers or mitigation bank buyers, even though we have a great base of players who really want the course to succeed," Platt said.

Things began heating up early last month when Lamberson said escrow would close Feb. 15 on the sale of up to 42 acres of the back nine to an unidentified buyer who plans to turn it into a mitigation bank.

That announcement sparked the formation of the citizens group, which feared the Fallbrook course would wind up looking like the defunct San Luis Rey Golf Course in Bonsall, which closed last year amid plans to turn it into a wetlands mitigation bank. The property has become an eyesore, residents said.

"It's a weed patch and a garbage dump," said Platt. "That's what mobilized us."

Progress has stalled on plans for the Fallbrook course's back nine and escrow has still hasn't closed, but the "deal is not dead," said Lamberson.

However, his plan to sell the front nine to an unidentified buyer more experienced in golf-course operations has fallen through, Lamberson said. He blamed that setback on the citizens' group.

"He (the prospective buyer) is just not interested in putting up with all the stuff that's going on," Lamberson said.

He said there are several other parties interested in buying the front nine, including three developers, but he prefers selling to someone who would preserve that part of the course. If that fails, Lamberson said, he'd rather develop the property himself.

"I could sell the front nine right now to a very solid developer for \$3.5 million," he said, which is the amount he owes the bank. "(But) before I just give it away for someone else to make money on, I would develop it myself."

The mixed messages have frustrated the citizens group.

"Last week, the course pro told us that Jack was going to keep the course open for two more years," said Joan McConnell, a group founder. "Then he does a complete about-face and changes his mind. He's done this more than once."

Nine members of the group spoke at the last meeting of the Fallbrook Community Planning Group, which is one of the many government agencies that would review permits to change the use of the golf course properties. Residents urged the panel to oppose any application to use the site for purposes other than golf.

Lamberson has “run this (course) into the ground” and driven away business, said Ed Erse, a Morro Hills resident who has played the course since 1988. “I remember when the bar and restaurant was a going thing. It’s an absolute morgue now.”

Platt and McConnell said they fear that Lamberson’s decision to stop watering and maintaining the site will make it more difficult for him to sell to another golf course operator.

“When will Jack leave so we can get a new owner who loves this course?” said Platt. “And in the meantime, how degraded will this course become when Jack abandons all care?”

In the past, residents have used their own hoses, mowers and weed whackers to help maintain the course, said McConnell, and they’re ready to do it again.

“That’s how people around here feel about this golf course,” she said.

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