

SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE

Part of Fallbrook course may convert to wetlands
Residents in uproar over plan to sell 42 acres in the back nine

By Bob Pickard | 4:22 p.m. Feb. 2, 2016 | Updated, 6:12 p.m.

FALLBROOK — A large portion of the Fallbrook Golf Course will be sold and turned into a mitigation bank, its owner said Tuesday, confirming rumors that had been swirling around the community for the past several weeks.

Up to 42 acres of the course's back nine are set to close escrow on Feb. 15, said Jack Lamberson, whose Lamberson Family Trust is the sole stockholder in the company that owns the 116-acre golf course property.

The planned sale — and Lamberson's initial refusal to say what the new buyer might do with the land — has caused an uproar in the tight-knit Fallbrook community, where more than 200 people attended a meeting Saturday organized by a citizens group called Save the Fallbrook Golf Course.

Led by Joan McConnell and Teresa Platt, the group was formed two weeks ago by homeowners who live near the picturesque Gird Valley course and fear the changes might hurt property values and quality of life in their neighborhood.

In the bank scenario, the acreage would be converted to wetlands, with portions sold as credits to developers to make up for the impacts of building projects elsewhere in the county. That's what's planned at the defunct San Luis Rey Downs Golf Course in neighboring Bonsall.

When that course was shuttered two years ago, irrigation was stopped to allow the land to revert to its natural state. What's left is a dying, dried-up landscape.

"It's an unmitigated disaster," said McConnell, a leader of the Fallbrook group.

"San Luis Rey Downs isn't a very good advertisement for mitigation banking," Platt added.

Lamberson said that although his buyers intend to create a mitigation bank, he doesn't believe residents near the Fallbrook course have anything to fear.

"I know the plans for the back nine and it won't be a San Luis Rey situation full of tumbleweeds," said Lamberson, who owns a home in Bonsall and has a bird's-eye view of what's happening at the San Luis Rey property.

He emphasized, however, that he has no control over what will happen to the Fallbrook back nine after escrow closes later this month.

Members of Save the Fallbrook Golf Course said they're frustrated that Lamberson wasn't more forthcoming about plans for the property once news broke a few weeks ago that it was being sold.

Though Lamberson had refused to confirm it, they suspected the new owners might pursue a mitigation bank, which requires a lengthy permitting process involving local, county, and federal agencies. The group has vowed to oppose it at every level.

And what about the front nine, where 54 homes line the course? Lamberson said he'd like to see that survive as a nine-hole course, with enhancements including a larger, lighted driving range. He said he's negotiating with an unidentified buyer who has the experience and capabilities to make a nine-hole course successful.

But the golf course owner won't be him, Lamberson emphasized.

"I want out so bad," he said. "We've lost money from the start."

Even if the pending deal goes through, Lamberson said he would lose \$1.6 million, which includes his down payment and more than \$900,000 in course improvements made since 2012.

Platt said she doesn't believe the claim of any major improvements.

"I live on the third tee," she said, "and if somebody spent almost a million dollars fixing things up, I would have noticed."

Lamberson said the only financial gain he'll get from the pending sale would come from paying down the mortgage on the entire 18-hole course.

"I can guarantee you we won't make one penny of profit," he says. "A lot of people will never believe that, but my conscience is clear."

Meanwhile, Platt said the citizens group is planning to attend the Feb. 15 meeting of the Fallbrook Community Planning Group to let them know "we're mobilized, we're awake, and we're worried."

"New management for the golf course is absolutely welcome," she said. "They'd see enormous support from us. But if they're coming to get a land-use change and go through the permitting process, they're going to get pushback."

Pickard is a freelance writer covering Fallbrook.