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City's oldest club spending millions to update course

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GREENSBORO -- The men who gathered in Greensboro Country Club's stately clubhouse two years ago looked at the problem from every angle, like caddies lining up a shot from the rough.

The problem was not a tricky golf shot, but the fact that private golf clubs are losing more members than are joining.

It wasn't that long ago that joining a country club seemed a birthright in Greensboro.

"You grew up, went to college, came back to Greensboro and joined the club," said Davy Davidson, Greensboro Country Club's new president. "It was that easy."

If only it were that easy now. Times -- and lifestyles -- have changed. So has the economy.

Greensboro's country clubs, like many across the nation, are evolving from exclusive hideaways for wealthy men into more casual, family-centered facilities appealing to two-income families who might need prodding to spend their limited leisure time at a club.

So to make theirs more attractive to more people, Greensboro Country Club members approved an ambitious plan, one they hope pays off down the road with new members.

The city's oldest club is renovating and expanding its Irving Park clubhouse to the tune of \$5 million. At the same time, the club is spending \$6 million to update its Carlson Farms course off Horse Pen Creek Road.

If the two projects seem to come at an odd time, you're right. Unemployment is at a 25-year high in North Carolina, where a month doesn't seem to pass without companies shedding thousands of jobs.

"Some people say this might not be the best time to undertake something like this," Davidson said. "We think it's the best time. We're going ahead with this, not just for our members but for the future of our club."

Greensboro Country Club isn't the only private club in the city to upgrade its image, just the latest. Sedgefield Country Club recently underwent a \$3 million renovation to its golf course. Starmount Country Club last year added an indoor tennis and fitness center. Across town, Cardinal Golf and Country Club invested nearly \$5 million in renovating its clubhouse and golf course.

But Greensboro Country Club's project may be the most ambitious. Making it all the more

remarkable is that it's being done without assessments to new or current members. Both projects are being paid for with cash reserves and any new initiation fees -- currently running at \$20,000.

The club is adding more than 10,300 square feet to its tennis and fitness center, including a new women's locker room and exercise room. The men's locker room, once dark and dreary, is now well-lit and lined with wood lockers. Sedgefield members who once bragged about their renovated men's locker room may have to take a back seat to Greensboro's tiled floors, leather couches and plasma televisions. No detail is too small, from the raised ceilings to the luxury rain shower heads.

But the biggest transformation -- and the one the club's golfing contingent is eagerly anticipating -- is at Carlson Farms.

Club officials hired British course architect Donald Steel to bring the "farm course," as it's known by members, into the 21st century.

Greensboro Country Club acquired the course, once home to a dairy farm, in 1961 and has made few changes to it since. The Ellis Maples-designed course was built in an era when architects didn't have much in the way of earth-moving equipment. That much is obvious to golfers who have walked its many hills and valleys.

Steel intends to level the course somewhat, moving 330,000 cubic yards of dirt in the process. Four holes will be new and several more are being reshaped to bring water into play or to heighten the course's many beautiful vistas.

Club member George House has played the farm course more than 1,000 times. "I was astounded by the views (Steel) saw that I'd never seen before," he said.

Unlike Greensboro's city course, a Donald Ross design that's hemmed in by Irving Park, the farm course has room to grow and that's what Steel intends to do with it. In a nod to the technology that has transformed golf's equipment, Steel is adding 460 yards to the course's length. What was once a par-71 course will be a 7,376 yard, par-72 brute -- easily the longest course in Guilford County and one of the longest in the state.

But the course isn't being built strictly for booming drivers. Every hole will have five different tee boxes; some will have six.

"We knew we couldn't just sit there with a 45-year-old golf course," Davidson said. "We want this club to be about many things to many different people, but our primary focus is golf. And if you're going to be in the golf business you've got to have a premiere golf course."

Officials expect the expanded clubhouse to be completed later this spring and for the new farm course to open again in the fall -- just in time for the club's 100th anniversary. Davidson said the club already has seen a return on its investment. He said the club added 60 new members last year "and we're off to a surprisingly good start this year."

"The club business is not easy," he said. "People have a lot of choices with their time and money, including not joining at all. We're very confident these changes have positioned us for the next 100 years."

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