

# Greener pastures: Golf course sinks cash into special grass

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**GREENSBORO** — Part of Greensboro Country Club's \$6 million renovation to its Farm House Course includes a hefty upfront investment in a specialized grass expected to reap savings down the road.

Davy Davidson, the club's president, said the club began looking last fall at installing zoysia grass. The grass stays green longer and requires less seeding, fertilizing, watering and mowing. It also chokes out weeds and is more resistant to insects.

Cost estimates at the time put installing 30 acres of zoysia at about \$500,000 more expensive than Bermuda or bent grass, more common to most golf courses in the area.

But Davidson said British golf course architect Donald Steel, who is working on the redesign, had saved some money by installing fewer bunkers and building fewer retaining walls. And by the spring, price per acre of zoysia had fallen from about \$20,000 to \$16,000.

"There are not a lot of golf course renovations going on right now," Davidson said. "If you have a sod farm with zoysia, you're not selling very much of it. And a lot of high-quality clubs that have the financial wherewithal are moving in this direction."

The number of private clubs with such financial means are dwindling. According to a recent report from the National Golf Foundation, the number of private clubs has gone from about 4,900 in 1988 to about 4,400 today. Of those, 500 or so report serious financial troubles.

High Point Country Club is among those clubs studying its options going forward. The club has during the past few months looked at assessing a \$6,000 fee to its 700 or so members or even a possible sale to a group of High Point business leaders. Club officials could not be reached for comment on where the process stands currently.

Davidson said the Greensboro club's renovations — which total \$11 million including upgrades to locker rooms and fitness facilities — are a response to the 1,500 existing members and an effort to appeal to potential members.

"Investments like this are done best with a long-term vision," he said. "Members say they want something that matches their lifestyle."

Other clubs in the Triad have taken notice of those trends as well. Once bastions for the wealthy and influential, clubs are trying to appeal to families looking for more than just golf privileges.

Starmount Forest Country Club in Greensboro, for example, recently completed a \$2 million upgrade to indoor and outdoor tennis courts as well as its fitness facility.

Larry Diana, the club's president, said that addition has helped stabilize membership, adding more value to a luxury item such as membership dues.

"We have a total family facility now, and I think our members are enjoying that," he said. "The economy has neutralized so much these days. But our social members who take advantage of that facility have been very pleased."

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