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## Greener days: Larger Triad country clubs playing through recession with \$10M in renovations

The Business Journal of the Greater Triad Area - by [Steve Ivey](#) Staff writer

The local golf industry is reflecting a trend in the overall economy during the recession — the fundamentally strongest players are using the opportunity to improve their position in the market while weaker operations are struggling.

In Guilford County alone, more than \$10 million in golf course renovations are concluding this spring, and that follows another \$7 million that has wrapped up within the past couple of years.

- **Greensboro Country Club** will formally open its \$6 million renovation to its Farm Course, in addition to \$5 million in improvements to its in-town clubhouse, locker rooms and fitness facilities that were completed last year.

- **Stoney Creek Golf Club**, east of Greensboro, is undergoing close to \$3 million in upgrades that will finish in July.

- And Bryan Park has improved its Champions Course in recent months to prepare for the United States Golf Association's U.S. Amateur Public Links Championship in July.

Not every course in the Triad has been in financial position to make significant upgrades, and some have found themselves in foreclosure.

But officials with all three courses say the moves were aimed at keeping pace in a competitive market. And while much of the design work is specialized and goes to out-of-town firms, as much as half the subcontracting budget goes to Triad companies.

In the case of Greensboro Country Club, the Farm Course upgrades also followed another \$5 million in renovations to its in-town clubhouse, locker rooms and fitness facilities.

The renovations include adding 388 yards to the course, a new irrigation system and redesigning several holes in case nearby Carlson Dairy Road ever needs to be widened.

“We felt like in order to retain our position as a premier club in our area, we had to have a truly top-quality golf course,” said Jerry Highsmith, the club's president. “To attract new members and stay viable, you have to offer a full menu of activities. We're trying to position ourselves for success over the long term. Thankfully our members saw the value in moving ahead in these difficult times.”

Stoney Creek, a semi-private course managed by Charlotte-based Pinnacle Golf Properties, is also undergoing \$2 million to \$3 million in renovations, Pinnacle's managing partner Kim Worrel said. Upgrades there include new greens, tee boxes and practice facilities.

He said Stoney Creek could see close to 30,000 rounds per year, an increase of several thousand over recent years.

“If we're going to compete in this highly competitive market, we wanted to offer the best product for the price,” Worrel said. “It's really a renewed focus on putting our business in the position to enhance revenue.”

At Bryan Park's Champions Course, general manager Kyle Kolls said new irrigation, new tee complexes and bunkers were in part to prepare for the Pub Links championship, which will bring 160 golfers and their families to Greensboro for a week this July. But it will also position the course to host more high-profile tournaments in the future.

Kolls said the course has already put in a bid for the 2013 NCAA Division I women's tournament.

“The work needed to be done whether we were having the Pub Links tournament or now,” Kolls said. “This just helped us expedite the process. It will improve the value for our day-to-day players as well. Players around here have a lot of choices, and we need to stay competitive.”

### Keeping pace

The current renovation projects follow a \$2 million project at **Starmount Forest Country Club** in Greensboro that added indoor tennis courts and modern fitness facilities last year.

Cardinal Golf and Country Club in Greensboro has also undergone \$5 million in upgrades over the past few years since being purchased by Raleigh-based McConnell Golf.

Not every course in the Triad has been in position to spend millions to stay competitive.

**Bermuda Run Country Club** went into control of a court-appointed receiver earlier this year after foreclosure proceedings began. A creditor claimed its owner, developer Don Angell's company WFBRC LLC, defaulted on an \$8 million loan.

Lenders were also preparing last month to foreclose on Greensboro National Golf Club in Eden . And local golf officials have indicated financial trouble hounding at least one other well-known private Triad club, though The Business Journal was unable to confirm it this week.

Jack Nance, executive director of the Carolinas Golf Association, said that public and private courses in the rural parts of the state have tended to struggle more as job losses and market dips have squeezed disposable income.

But in the metro areas, stronger clubs are taking advantage of cheaper material costs and contractors hungry for work.

"It's kind of shocking when you think about it that clubs are out there spending millions of dollars right now," Nance said.

"But those that are out there doing this work are going to set themselves apart. These aren't the old days when clubs have long waiting lists of people knocking on their doors. They have to do all they can now to attract new members. And that's what we're seeing."

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