

Fountains Country Club: Are happy days back at divided community?

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A country club is supposed to be a relaxing retreat. But for years, the Fountains Country Club community in suburban Lake Worth has been anything but calm, with residents waging war over the management and future of its club. Now it looks like Fountains residents may finally have worked their way out of the rough.

They voted to sell the club to a professional golf club operator, Concert Golf Partners.

They ended mandatory membership in the country club, making it easier for people to buy and sell homes, and ending lawsuits between the club and residents. Residents hope these changes will usher in more peaceful times.

But the proposed sale may not stop another controversy that's been dividing the community: Plans to sell parts of one of three golf courses to a housing developer.

On Wednesday, a GL Homes vice president confirmed talks are underway with Concert Golf about building 470 townhomes on part of the club's north course, which has been closed for a while. These talks began in 2016 with the country club's volunteer leadership, and they are expected to continue with Concert Golf.

The Fountains and many other country club communities in Palm Beach County face a similar problem. Their residents are aging and their clubs' membership roster is dwindling, yet club maintenance costs and debt payments remained ongoing.

Sometimes clubs sell all or parts of their golf courses to real estate developers. Sometimes clubs levy special assessments or hike member fees to keep revenues rolling in.

But the battle over the country club's fate became particularly acrimonious at the Fountains, an 865 acre-development featuring 19 individual residential communities and 1,763 homes. The property, along Jog Road, is bordered by Lake Worth Road on the north and Lantana Road on the south.

During the past several years, the club filed dozens of lawsuits against residents fighting mandatory club dues. Some Fountains residents quit the club because they couldn't pay the dues or were too old to play golf. But the country club would not let them off the hook, resulting in endless litigation and bad blood among neighbors.

Club president Jeff Hamburger did not return phone calls or emails for comment.

Residents in northern subdivisions years ago won a legal battle to undo mandatory membership. Only residents living in The Fountain's southern communities were required to have mandatory club membership.

That just changed.

Earlier this month, residents of the 1,763-home community voted 355-3 to end mandatory membership in the entire community.

They also decided to get out of the country club business, voting 405-13 to sell the country club, featuring three golf courses and two club houses, to Concert Golf Partners.

Concert Golf is a Newport Beach, Calif.-based company owns private golf clubs around the country. Last year it bought Indian Spring Country Club in Boynton Beach.

Concert Golf Chairman Peter Nanula declined to comment on the Fountains club sale, which has not yet closed. Nanula also would not disclose the price being paid for the club, although the community's blog said the deal with Concert Golf includes the assumption of \$10 million of club debt.

The moves are expected to boost home values in the community — and end the contentious litigation.

Sharon Harrington is a Fountains Country Club resident who helped lead the effort to undo mandatory club membership.

She said home prices have been artificially depressed for years. That's because homes could not be sold without a home buyer also having to sign up to be a member of the club, which for a couple cost \$22,000 per year for golf privileges.

With the changes made, "I am thrilled," Harrington said. "We've been trying to get mandatory membership out of here since around 2009."

Concert Golf Partners will not require residents to be club members. Those who do decide to join will be charged lower club fees, such as \$12,550 per couple for golf, roughly half the amount now charged.

Under Concert Golf, the club will be debt free and run by a professional golf club company.

But while the club's finances might shape up, the future of the open vistas remains a question. With good in-town sites hard to find, real estate developers, such as GL Homes, are eager to redevelop golf courses in prime locations.

Fountains residents fought hard against earlier plans to sell parts one of golf course to GL Homes, which at first proposed building single-family homes and rental apartments on parts of the shuttered north course. Residents worried about traffic and lost views.

Late last year, GL Homes changed the plans to feature 470 for-sale townhouses. The homes would classify as workforce housing, ranging in price from \$140,000 to \$260,000, said Larry Portnoy, GL Homes vice president.

Portnoy said GL Homes like the Fountains community because it's centrally located. The project, if built, also would fulfill requirements that the builder construct workforce housing in Palm Beach County, he said.

Portnoy said GL Homes continues to discuss its interest with Concert Golf: "We're hopeful we'll have the opportunity to purchase the parcels originally under contract." That contract price, he said, was \$15million.

Nanula wouldn't discuss any possible sale of the north course land. If GL Homes is successful in clinching a deal with Concert Golf for the Fountains land, it would mark the latest golf course redevelopment by the Sunrise-based home builder.

GL Homes is close to wrapping up a purchase of the golf course at the Polo Trace Golf and Country Club in suburban Delray Beach, Portnoy said. The community is off of Hagen Ranch Rd. and Atlantic Avenue.

GL Homes plans to build 324 single-family homes on the golf course, which would close once the sale is completed. Portnoy said home prices haven't yet been set for the project.

