

Taking the Golf Out of Golf Communities

Around the country, planned developments are adapting and reinventing in order to appeal to a wider range of buyers.

By Steven Kurutz

This article is part of our International Homes special section, which takes a look at homes and golf, from planned communities and sustainability to course designers and where they live.

MacDonald Highlands is a master-planned community of less than 1,000 units in Henderson, Nev., a wealthy suburb of Las Vegas within squinting distance of the Strip. For years, its main selling point was DragonRidge Country Club, a private 18-hole golf course sculpted out of the desert foothills, with emerald fairways that wind past multi-million-dollar homes.

But lately, the property's owner, Rich MacDonald, has had more on his mind than golf.

Mr. MacDonald opened the club in 2001, sold it in 2014 and bought it back in 2016. When he did, he said: "I wanted to make sure we have the equivalent of a cruise director. Someone who does fun things, interesting events. We've had to adapt quite a bit because the social aspect seems to be the main focus for new residents."

At existing golf communities around the country, a similar story of adaptation and reinvention is playing out.

WindRiver, once a golf-centered planned community near Knoxville, Tenn., has been transformed for active lifestyles with trails, a gym, a pool, tennis and pickleball courts, a marina and a lakefront park.

At Hilton Head Plantation, a gated golf community on Hilton Head Island in South Carolina, an old recreation center is being remade into a family pool complex with a splash pad for children. And at Wickenburg Ranch in Wickenburg, Ariz., the 18-hole "Big Wick" golf course has been augmented with a second course, which includes a bar, an outdoor lounge area and a relaxed vibe.

The golf course real estate industry took a hammering in the years after the Great Recession, as an oversupply of courses failed to meet demand from buyers. A decade later, the situation is still shaking out. Course closures have averaged around 200 a year in recent years, according to the National Golf Foundation, a market research provider.

Golf is not dead. But these days, residents of golf course communities want amenities that go beyond the game, and developers, land planners and owner-operators have been tasked with finding ways to modernize what had become, for many, an outdated model.

"What we're seeing is not an alternative to golf but an addition to golf," said Troy Lucas, vice president of Daniel Communities, an Alabama-based manager of master-planned communities. "It's golf and."

One popular addition is nature-based amenities, like walking and biking paths and hiking trails, Mr. Lucas said. Whereas in the past, a round of golf constituted exercise, now "parks and trails are far more favorable," he said.

"Then it's having destinations for the paths to lead, like to a fitness facility," Mr. Lucas added.

At WindRiver, the owners built two trail hubs that connect to an existing Tennessee Valley Authority trail system, offering residents a 30-mile jaunt up and down the eastern portion of Tellico Reservoir.

Golf course land was used for some of the walking paths. And while the current 900-unit property is permitted for up to 1,200 units, said Joseph Ayres, the executive vice president at WindRiver, the ownership wants to preserve plenty of green space, as do the residents.

"The world's just changed a lot in the last 15 years," Mr. Ayres said. "The focus on healthy living and wellness has become the forefront."

Family dynamics also have changed. In the days when most American men were family breadwinners, they viewed a club membership as a reward and an entitlement. It was a place to get away from the wife and children, and hang out with your buddies. That outlook shaped the way golf communities were built and run for decades.

"Clubs used to be aimed primarily at male golfers," said Peter Nanula, chairman of Concert Golf Partners, an owner-operator of private golf and country clubs.

But in an age when "there's no hall pass for modern dads," said Mr. Nanula, communities must cater to the entire family. Or, as Rob DeMore of Troon Privé, the private club division of Troon, a management company, put it, "all the stakeholders are valued now, which includes spouses, kids, pets."

That means paddle tennis and pickleball courts, especially in the Northeast, where the games can be played in the shoulder seasons; children's centers and playgrounds; dog parks and pet-friendly restaurants and clubhouses.

Mark L. Baker, the president of Wood and Partners, a South Carolina-based landscape architecture firm, said Reynolds Lake Oconee in Georgia, a planned community between Atlanta and Augusta, has recently built multiple family pool complexes, including Reynolds Landing and The Lake Club.

“In the old days, we didn’t want children to be splashing about and having fun,” Mr. Baker said, describing the preferred atmosphere then as sedate and sectioned off into separate adult and children areas. “What has changed is we don’t want to spend time away from our children playing golf. We want to enjoy being with them.”

The inclusion of whole families in golf community design is probably a result of changing demographics. Millennial-generation buyers are moving into planned communities in addition to the typical retirees.

Mike Cutler, senior vice president for Billy Casper Golf, which owns, manages and leases golf courses, including in private communities, said he had noticed some community boards removing age restrictions to allow for younger buyers.

“I can think of communities we manage with school bus stops,” he said. “You never used to see that before.”

Mr. MacDonald, the owner of DragonRidge, has the Las Vegas Strip at his disposal. His social director can gather a group of 20 adults or a few families and take them to a high-end restaurant to meet the chef or to a casino show. But for communities that must build out the amenities that today’s buyers want, tough decisions sometimes have to be made about the existing golf course. Especially if that course has been underused for years and is looking shabby.

That could mean downsizing a course to nine holes from 18 to to repurpose the land. Or it could mean “regreening,” as Ellen Dunham-Jones, the director of the urban design program at Georgia Tech University and the co-author of “Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs,” has found across the country.

Ms. Dunham-Jones maintains a database of suburban property types that have been retrofitted, including 129 golf courses, a third of which have been regreened. “They are being turned into parks, into farms, into nature,” she said.

In Reston, Va., the utopian planned community developed in the 1960s, a 160-acre private golf course may soon see its last tee time. Its owner, Wheelock Communities, is proposing to turn it into a mixed-use development with housing and a 100-acre public park. The park would include miles of trails, a garden of remembrance, a recreation area designed for seniors, an inclusive playground for children of all abilities and a modern tennis complex.

“This is consistent with what we’re seeing in other master-planned communities,” said Stephanie Pankiewicz, a partner at LandDesign, the firm hired to design the project, which is in the approval stages. “People just have a different expectation for recreational amenities today. Golf is very time intensive.”

Indeed, one of the hottest features of golf real estate today is not new golf courses but golf simulators.

“We put them in all our clubs if they don’t have it,” Mr. Nanula said. “It’s very social. You can have drinks, bet. Four guys can see who can hit the longest drive at Augusta National.”

And it does not take five hours.