CHAPTER 25

GOLF COURSES

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"Should we allow so many golf courses to be built?"

Many residents believe that golf courses provide few benefits other than recreation for a small number of residents and rich tourists, take a lot of land and water that would be better used for farming or housing, require chemicals that pollute our environment, and drive up property taxes.

Contrary to these common perceptions, golf courses provide many benefits to Hawaii—benefits which far exceed those generated by many of Hawaii's other major users of land. Furthermore, with careful site and water-supply selection, and appropriate design and management, many golf courses can be built in Hawaii with minimal adverse impacts.

Demand for golf courses. As of early 1992, 68 golf courses operated in Hawaii, 14 more were under construction, another 13 had received major state and county approvals, and an estimated demand existed for another 23 by the year 2000—a potential total of 118 golf courses.

Benefits. The most obvious benefit of 118 golf courses is the recreation they will provide to about 17,000 golfers a day. Local golfers

will be able to get tee times more easily (currently a major problem for golfers who are not members of private clubs), and green fees will be significantly lower than they would be if no new courses were built. Also, existing and new golf courses will provide about 21,000 acres of greenery scattered throughout the state, with the golfers paying the high cost of maintaining this greenery.

The primary economic benefit of *resort* golf courses is that they contribute to the economic health of Hawaii's largest industry and, in turn, to the economic health of the state. Golf courses help keep hotel rooms full of guests who tend to spend more than the average visitor and, as a group, are likely to visit Hawaii even during recessions. Because of golf's growing popularity, courses are regarded as virtual necessities for many resorts in order for them to remain competitive with other resort destinations around the world.

Also, the golf-course industry is a major employer in Hawaii and will soon provide more jobs than either the sugar or pineapple industries while using far less land. By the year 2000, golf courses are projected to provide 5,800 jobs using about 21,000 acres, compared with 5,360 jobs in sugar using nearly 162,000 acres in 1990, and 3,450 jobs in pineapple on nearly 31,000 acres.

Furthermore, by the year 2000, golf courses will provide about 2,300 grounds-maintenance jobs, compared with 3,080 and 1,850 field jobs respectively in the sugar and pineapple industries in 1990. Most of the grounds-maintenance jobs provided by golf courses are outdoor jobs involved with cultivating grasses and plants, applying fertilizers and chemicals, maintaining irrigation systems, etc. In terms of function, these jobs are similar to certain ones in agriculture, and require similar skills and training. These agricultural-type jobs are significant when one considers the declining agricultural employment in Hawaii and the number of new graduates in agriculture who need jobs.

Many golf courses also serve as cost-effective drainage channels and flood-retention basins. As such, they are far better solutions to drainage and potential flooding problems than are concrete-lined storm drains, in that golf courses are far more attractive, the grasses filter out silt and nutrients thereby reducing pollution of coastal waters, and the retained rainwater seeps into the ground to restore the groundwater supply.

In a number of cases, golf courses serve as buffers and safety zones

to protect residents from nuisance activities.

Comparative benefits. If the sugar industry (our dominant land user) is considered to be good for Hawaii—and most people do believe this—then golf courses should be regarded as better, since they provide far more benefits and impact the environment far less (see Table 1). Compared to 180 acres in sugarcane (which is a tall grass), a golf course provides greater recreational opportunities and access, far more jobs, more agricultural-type jobs, more high-level jobs, greater employment security, far higher tax revenues, lower water consumption, less demand on potable water sources, a less disruptive impact on land, a cleaner environment, and a more favorable impact on neighboring properties. Similar comparisons apply to most other types of agriculture.

This is not to suggest that golf courses should replace agriculture. Actually, it is possible to have both.

Compatibility with agriculture and housing. Assuming that the estimated demand for golf courses to the year 2000 is to be met, then an additional 23 golf courses must be approved. The land required would amount to about 4,100 acres, about one-third the acreage of an average sugar plantation. This land requirement can be met easily without adversely affecting existing agricultural activities or the growth of diversified agriculture, using (1) less than 0.5 percent of the more than one million acres of "junk" lands in the State Agricultural District that are *unsuitable* for commercial crops due to poor soils or expensive water (lava lands in West Hawaii, for example); or (2) less than 4 percent of the 120,000 acres of land which, since the late 1960s, has already been released from plantation agriculture; or (3) some combination of the two.

Similarly, new golf courses need not take up land that could otherwise be used for housing. In developing urban areas, locations suitable for golf courses but not housing include drainage ways that are subject to occasional flooding, areas within potential blast zones surrounding munitions depots, high-noise zones near airports or under flight paths, land under high-voltage lines, and areas having soils that would be unstable for housing foundations. Most of the new and planned golf courses in Ewa and central Oahu fall into one or more of these categories.

Water requirements. Water for golf courses can be a more difficult

issue than land. Nevertheless, water sources are available that would not adversely affect the availability of water for domestic or agricultural use. These include brackish water (too saline for domestic consumption or most farming, but not for salt-tolerant golf-course vegetation); treated wastewater; areas where the supply is abundant due to heavy rainfall or cutbacks in sugar and the supply far exceeds potential demand; and water that is not desired by other users, possibly because it would be too expensive to deliver for agricultural or urban use.

To a significant degree, golf courses can help solve water-supply problems. When treated wastewater is used for irrigation, a portion seeps down to recharge the groundwater supply and becomes available for reuse to irrigate other greenery. In the process, the wastewater is stripped of nutrients and contaminants by the filtering action of the grass and soil. Thus, the water is recycled rather than being lost when it is pumped into the ocean.

Environmental impacts. A concern often raised about golf courses is that the fertilizers and chemicals used on them will run off and may contaminate groundwater supplies or pollute streams and coastal waters. Although golf courses are inappropriate for environmentally sensitive areas such as wetlands, extensive monitoring of the environmental impacts of golf courses in Hawaii has led university researchers to conclude that they rarely cause environmental problems, and that they are one of the most benign human uses of land. On a professionally managed golf course, problems are spot-treated, resulting in much less impact than occurs with most agricultural and urban activities.

Property values and taxes. Farmers and residents have expressed fear that if a golf course is built in their neighborhood, then property values and taxes will rise. However, the increased land values are generally limited to lots that *front* the courses, with most of the increase in value being captured by the project developers. Furthermore, property taxes will not change for lands dedicated to agriculture, since the tax is based on the low agricultural value of the land, rather than on its much higher market value.

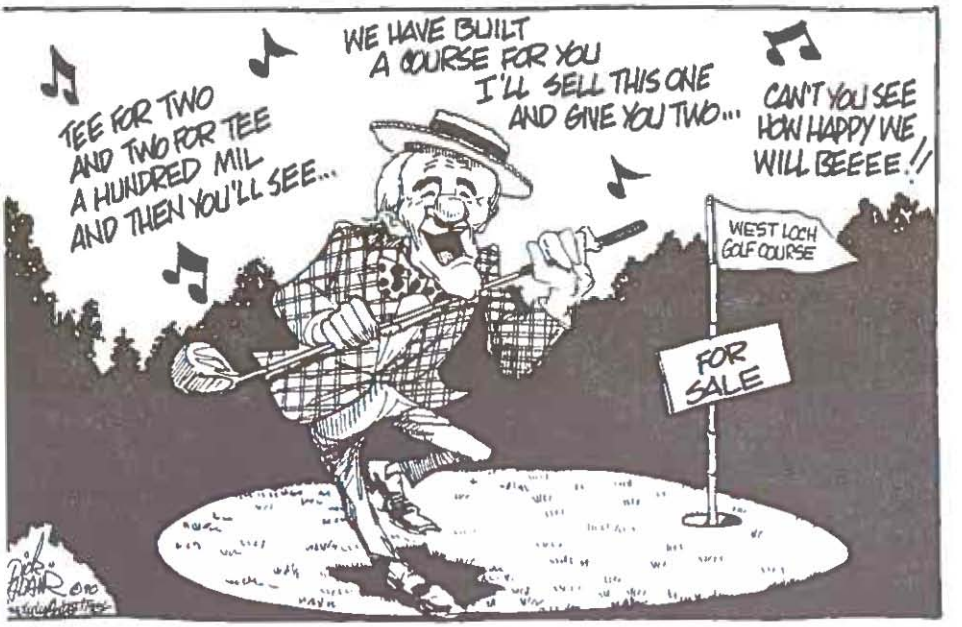
For homeowners whose property values do rise, the associated increase in property taxes is comparatively small. For example, for Oahu homeowners, each $1,000-increase in the value of a lot (and the resulting increase in the wealth of the homeowner) results in an

increase in property taxes of only 27 cents a month (1991/92 rates).

In summary, with proper site selection and management, golf courses provide far more benefits with far fewer adverse impacts than are generally recognized.

Table 1
GOLF COURSE VS. SUGAR OPERATIONS:
COMPARATIVE BENEFITS AND IMPACTS (180 acres)

Item	Golf Course	Sugarcane
Recreational Opportunities and Access	100 to 300 golfers a day	None
Employment:		
Total jobs	30 to 80+	About 6
Agricultural-type jobs	15 to 22	3.3
High-level jobs	5 to 14	1.7
Employment security	Stable	At risk
Tax Revenues:		
State tax revenues:		
-Construction-related	Up to $14 mil. (net)	Not applicable
-Operations (excise tax on final sales)	Up to $200,000 a year (net)	None
County tax revenues (property taxes)	Up to $240,000 a year (net)	About $1,000 a year
Water:		
Use	About 0.7 mgd	About 1.5 mgd
Quality	Brackish or treated effluent	Sweet to slightly brackish
Impact on Land	Major features preserved	Major features altered
Environmental Impacts:		
Construction or harvesting and planting	Soil runoff (one-time)	Greater soil runoff, dust, noise & smoke
Operations	Small risk of chemical runoff and leaching	More chemicals, rodents
Impact on Neighboring Properties	Enchanced	Degraded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AND TWO FOR TEE
A HUNDRED MIL
AND THEN YOU'LL SEE...
WE HAVE BUILT
A COURSE FOR YOU
I'LL SELL THIS ONE
AND GIVE YOU TWO...
CAN'T YOU SEE
HOW HAPPY WE
WILL BEEEE!!
WEST LOCH
GOLF COURSE
FOR
SALE