

Baltimore Sun: Perspective

Sunday, July 31, 2005

By: Timothy B. Wheeler

'Raising the bar' on future waterfront golf-courses projects

QUEENSTOWN - Red-winged blackbirds flit among the trees. A doe and her fawn barely glance up from their leafy brunch as golf carts glide past. In the distance beyond the second green, a lone workboat plies the Chester River for crabs. The wildlife and water views of Queenstown Harbor golf links appeal to Pat Dunn. The financial planner from Kensington celebrated his 47th birthday here recently with seven buddies, whacking little white balls around with the Chesapeake Bay for a backdrop. "It makes it a really big draw," Dunn said of the waterfront setting for the public course, which bills itself as "part nature sanctuary," with 36 holes laid out among woods and wetlands.

Now, with another golf course proposed on the banks of a different bay tributary on the Eastern Shore, questions have been raised anew about how to protect the beleaguered Chesapeake from being loved to death by this popular pastime.

Golfing enthusiasts and even some environmental specialists say that if properly designed and carefully maintained, waterfront links should pose little threat to the bay. But others worry that new guidelines for building golf courses along the bay's undeveloped shoreline - which are scheduled for adoption by a state regulatory panel this week- could chip away at Maryland's pioneering 1984 Critical Area law, which tries to protect the Chesapeake from harmful development.

"A golf course is a fairly intensely developed item," says Dru Schmidt-Perkins, executive director of the land-conservation group, 1000 Friends of Maryland. "It requires huge amounts of land shaping, maintenance and an awful lot of chemicals - in an area that's supposed to be kept pristine? It doesn't make a lot of sense to me."

With four golf courses along undeveloped shoreline already approved over the past 15 years, officials with the Chesapeake Bay Critical Area Commission say it's too late to bar them - and there's really no need to, if they're built with adequate safeguards.

"What we're trying to do is put in place specific standards that can be used as a model for environmental protection," said Martin G. Madden, a former state senator who is chairman of the commission. The 29-member panel is charged with regulation development within the "Critical Area," a 1,000-foot strip of land along the water's edge of the bay and its tidal tributaries.

About 80 percent of the bay's shoreline remains in forests, farm fields or other open space. Under the Critical Area law it is classified as a "resource conservation area," where commercial and industrial development is barred and home building is strictly limited to one dwelling per 20 acres.

After extensive debate, the Critical Area commission approved the Queenstown links in 1990, but stressed that it did so only because of the environmental safeguards agreed to by the course's developer to prevent water pollution and provide wildlife habitat. Since then, the state panel has approved three other courses, each part of a larger development that included homes, hotels and other structures - and none with as many provisions to minimize their impacts on the bay.

In the three later cases, however, the commission counted at least some portion of the projects against the limited "growth allocation" each bay-front county has for developing pristine shoreline.

Now, in what officials say is an attempt to "raise the bar" on future waterfront golf-course development, the commission has proposed design and operation standards, which are modeled on the Queenstown links.

The proposal calls for keeping fairways, tees and green 300 feet back from tidal waters and wetlands, and for maintaining 150-foot buffers on each side of any streams that may flow through the course. It also advocates extensive stormwater collection systems to minimize polluted runoff getting into the bay, and restrictions on the use of fertilizers and pesticides.

Those kinds of measures have drawn birds and deer to the Queenstown course and virtually eliminated runoff of nitrate fertilizer from the former farm fields where golfers now roam, says Lex Birney, chief executive officer of The Brick Companies, which operates that course and two others in the region.

“What the commission is trying to do is strike a balance with protecting the resource conservation area,” said Ren Serey, the commission’s staff director, “by making sure the golf courses that are built are built to the best designs possible.”

Richard Klein, an environmental consultant for community groups who frequently spars with developers, agrees that well-planned and -run courses can minimize waterway pollution.

“If you do a good job on the buffers ... I would think in a lot of situations a golf course would be a net improvement on the crop fields that preceded it, in terms of water quality,” says Klein.

The Critical Area panel proposed standards for building golf courses along “resource conservation” stretches of bayfront earlier this month after being confronted with plans for a 3,200 home “resort community” along the Little Blackwater River in Dorchester County.

Officials in Cambridge, which annexed 1,000 acres south of the city for development, and Dorchester are reviewing the golf course plans now as part of the overall resort proposal.

The golf course proposed as part of Blackwater Resort Communities in Cambridge provides for a 100-foot forested setback from the river, which the developer contends is at least as good as the 300-foot grassy buffer recommended by the state and far better than the 25-foot buffer required for farm fields, which are there now.

“We are confident to the end of the day the effect Little Blackwater is going to a good one,” says William ‘Sandy’ McAllister, lawyer for the developer.

Opponents of that project - as well as some environmental advocates - contend the bay could suffer because the state’s proposed golf-course standards are vague and too flexible.

Douglas Worrell, a lawyer for Dorchester Citizens for Planned Growth, says the standards are little more than recommendations, which local officials, eager to woo developers, may feel free to ignore. The commission should make wide buffers and other protections mandatory, he argues, if only because a financially struggling golf-course operator might be tempted to cut corners on environmental safeguards.

The state Critical Area pane has only limited leverage over where and how waterfront golf courses are built. Local officials unwilling to abide by state restrictions can opt to use some of the “growth allocation” given each bay county - about 1,650 acres in Dorchester’s case. The golf course could take up as much as 315 acres of that, according to county planner Steve Dodd.

But local officials prefer to save their bayfront “growth allocation” for high-end commercial and residential projects that will generate the most tax revenues, suggest George Maurer, a planner with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. He contends the Critical Area commission should set high standards that give local officials no room to fudge.

“The horse is already out of the barn,” Maurer says, of the golf courses already approved. “I’m just trying to rein him back in.”

Meanwhile, Fred Pomeroy, a Dorchester schoolteacher and part-time waterman opposed to the resort project near him, laments how the debate is so narrowly focused on the golf course, which he contends is just bait the developer plans to use to lure home buyers.

“The larger question is, what are we doing with our open spaces?” Pomeroy asks. “Are we thinking of the future, or are we just trying to let people use up what’s there to make a profit?”