

# The Times-Picayune

## City Park board weighs views on golf upgrade

**Opponents want focus on nature**

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Two-plus hours of peaceful exchange between those who favor a \$46 million golf complex at City Park and those who don't turned up par for the course Tuesday.

Whether opponents of the master plan stemmed momentum already generated by the Bayou District Foundation to transform hundreds of acres into an elite golfing destination remains to be seen.

A decision could be made as early as March 24, when the City Park Board of Commissioners meets at the Pavilion of the Two Sisters. If approved, construction on Phase 1 of the project could begin this year.

Despite assertions from several speakers at the public hearing, City Park CEO Bob Becker insists no decision has been reached by the 36-member board.

"It is not a done deal," Becker said. "It is too soon for us to know. Like all of our hearings, there are many people who have their own interest how they use the park. That's a very understandable thing. Some people use the park to walk their dog. Some use it to play golf. Some use it to ride their bike or watch birds. It's natural that people want to protect their interests. It's our job to balance all of the needs in this region's population."

If built, Phase I would cost approximately \$24.5 million and would include the construction of an 18-hole championship course, clubhouse, access road to the clubhouse and parking, driving range, range clubhouse and maintenance facility, all encompassed between I-610 and Filmore Avenue and bounded east and west by Marconi and Wisner boulevards.

City Park has in hand about \$15.5 million: \$5.9 million in FEMA reimbursements and \$9.65 million in state capital outlay funds. The nonprofit Bayou District Foundation is raising approximately \$9 million in private money to cover the remaining costs of the first phase.

The 18-hole North Course at City Park would remain open for play during construction of Phase 1.

Phase 2 of the master plan would cost approximately \$21.5 million and would feature a second 18-hole golf course, a 9-hole, par 3 course and a First Tee teaching facility. The North Course would cease daily operations once construction begins on Phase 2. There is no timetable to begin Phase 2.

"Look, I was born and raised here," said Mike Rodrigue, a board member of the Bayou District Foundation and member of the Fore!Kids Foundation, which produces the annual Zurich Classic of New Orleans at TPC Louisiana. "We're all sensitive to the needs of all the constituencies, and I look forward to just making the park better."

Rodrigue said he didn't see or hear anything Tuesday night that would prevent the master plan from winning approval. He dismissed comments from some citizens who contended the underlying reason behind the master plan is to one day have City Park become the new home to the PGA Tour event.

"Our home is the TPC Louisiana," Rodrigue said. "We're just trying to build the right and proper facility that will last for the next 100 years."

Of the approximately 35 people who voiced an opinion, those who favor upgrading the park's golf complex were outnumbered by a slight margin by those who don't. Nature lovers and defenders of the park's green space strongly opposed those with golfing interests.

"I feel there are better ways to spend \$46 million," said Wendy King of the Sierra Club. "Keep City Park open for park usage."

"I am not a golfer, never picked up a club in my entire life," said Lake Vista resident David Bravo. "I am a green space lover . . . but I also am realistic. I do believe the state in the coming years is going to be faced with very serious budget deficits. We have to find long-term funding solutions for this park. Golf has generated most of the revenues for this park. There is going to be plenty of green space in this park."

Said Melissa Phillips: "I think we're looking at financial disaster here. I see a ton of water here (on the proposed golf courses). What about the mosquitoes?"

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, approximately 510 acres were devoted to four golf courses at City Park. The North Course and driving range currently occupy 120 acres. Under the master plan, the golf complex would occupy approximately 400 acres of the park's 1,300 acres, or about 31 percent.

Michael Finney, a New Orleans native and golf professional who lives outside Louisville, Ky., encouraged City Park officials and the Bayou District Foundation to come up with "affordable golf." Under the master plan, the high-end No. 1 course (par 72, 7,520 yards) would occupy the southern portion of the golf footprint, site of the most recent East and West courses, and would cost Louisiana residents between \$50 and \$95 to play.

The shorter and less expensive No. 2 course (par 72, 7,010 yards) would start south of Filmore, cross the road and wrap around a new 9-hole executive course where the North Course currently is located, and would cost state residents between \$40 and \$65.

Plans call for a new \$3.3 million clubhouse that can be accessed off Wisner Boulevard, where Mirabeau currently dead-ends into the park.

"Subject to the financing, the golf courses will be built," said Finney, son of longtime Times-Picayune sports columnist Peter Finney. "It's a political power play to get the tour event to City Park.

"I want affordable golf in City Park. We're going to have (the new courses) whether (opponents of the plan) like it or not."

To which one man replied: "It's going to happen whether we like it or not, and I don't like it."

New Orleans PGA Tour pro Kelly Gibson defended the master plan, saying it is something New Orleans desperately needs to enhance its position in the tourism industry.

"This has been done in other cities," Gibson said. "I don't quite understand the controversy. This is a positive thing for New Orleans."

The master plan can be viewed at [www.nocp.org](http://www.nocp.org).

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