

The Times-Picayune

Smaller City Park golf plan approved

Published: Tuesday, March 22, 2011, 11:13 PM Updated: Tuesday, March 22, 2011, 11:28 PM



By [Frank Donze, The Times-Picayune](#)

With an eye toward closing a long-discussed deal with a golf developer in the next few months, the [City Park](#) Improvement Association gave its unanimous approval Tuesday to a scaled-down plan that reduces by 20 percent [the land set aside for a proposed championship course](#).



Doug Parker, The Times-Picayune archive

Golfing at the north course at City Park was photographed in October.

The action by the board sets the stage for park administrators to complete negotiations with the [Bayou District Foundation](#), a New Orleans nonprofit group that wants to build and operate a "high-end," 18-hole course, clubhouse and driving range between Interstate 610 and Filmore Avenue.

Board President Robert Lupo said he hopes to have a draft agreement with Bayou District by the end of April. If the document passes muster with the state Attorney General's Office, he said, a vote to implement it could be taken as early as May.

Talks with Bayou District began a year ago after the foundation's bid received the top score among three submitted to City Park.

The cash-strapped park has relied heavily on golf-related revenue for generations. But because of damage from Hurricane Katrina, all golf activities were mothballed until September 2009, when the North Course reopened.

Since the storm, park officials have grappled with how to replace the ruined East and West courses with a layout worthy of hosting professional tournaments.

Even before Katrina, the park often faced vocal opposition from some quarters that too much greenspace was dedicated to golf.

The park closed the 100-acre South course after the storm to create more recreational areas, starting with a \$3 million transformation of the area around the lagoon known as Big Lake that debuted in 2009.

Future improvements include a \$4 million festival grounds, a 63-acre project that will stretch along Wisner Boulevard north toward Interstate 610.

Lupo said the course redesign that got the green light Tuesday represents another effort to address the concerns of park patrons who aren't big fans of golf. The revised plan eliminates a 9-hole course and reduces from 310 acres to 250 acres the space needed for the new, 18-hole layout.

On Tuesday, the two speakers who stepped to the microphone both commended the park board for placing a priority on greenspace.

Mike Tifft, a local attorney who spoke on behalf of the Orleans Audubon Society, said he was encouraged by the new plan and urged planners to take pains to protect the park's Couerrie Forest.

Melissa Gray, who has protested the redevelopment of the City Park golf complex in the past, said she was elated about the new approach.

"I'm thrilled about more greenspace," she said. "I couldn't be more happy about that."

When Gray asked how long the park's agreement with Bayou District will be, park officials said that is one of the many details still under negotiation.

Lupo has declined to discuss details of negotiations, but he said the board has made it clear that the 40-year lease Bayou District asked for will have to be reduced. He also said the park is demanding a minimum annual guarantee of about \$1 million in revenue.

Until recently, the park envisioned a golf project with an estimated price tag of \$24.5 million that required Bayou District to bring \$8.9 million to the table.

But Lupo said design changes, including the smaller footprint and a decision to rebuild the clubhouse and driving range in their present locations, have shaved about \$2.5 million in costs.

At this point, Lupo said, the park is still counting on Bayou District to stick to its \$8.9 million pledge, although he acknowledged that the final deal could reduce the nonprofit's financial stake.

While he remains optimistic that a deal is imminent, Lupo said the park is prepared to go it alone with its own money if necessary. City Park has about \$15.5 million in hand: \$5.9 million in FEMA reimbursements and \$9.65 million from the state capital outlay program.

Without private dollars, the park would have to further scale back the project. For example, officials say a new clubhouse would be put on the back burner, with golf operations for the new course housed in temporary trailers. In addition, driving-range improvements would be put on hold.

City Park CEO Bob Becker has said he would like to see the first rounds of golf played on the course during the first quarter of 2013.

Frank Donze can be reached at fdonze@timespicayune.com or 504.826.3328.