Growing UNT eyes golf course for expansion

By DAVID WETHE
Staff Writer

DENTON — Jim Bob Jackson’s college golfers are without a home.
The men’s golf coach at the University of North Texas holds team practices at seven other area courses as far as 20 miles away, even though Eagle Point Golf Club lies just a chip shot from campus on land owned by the university since World War II.
The forsaken course, which has been unprofitable and uncompetitive with other courses for the last several years, has taken

See Growing, Page 23

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UNT: University ponders razing Eagle Point Golf Club in Denton

Continued from Page 1

a financial toll on both the company that runs it and on the Denton university. UNT depends on an annual cut of the course revenue as part of a lease with the course operator that runs through 2012.

Now, UNT wants to tear up the 158-acre "functionally obsolete" course and start construction on the first phase of an expansion project by April. That's because the university has run out of space everywhere else.

With 30,183 students, UNT is experiencing record enrollment and a football renaissance, winning back-to-back Sun Belt conference championships. The university is planning to build three new dormitories and beef up its athletic facilities over the next several years.

That's in addition to a massive remodeling job under way at an abandoned Texas Instruments complex about a mile north of campus. That redevelopment will house UNT's new College of Engineering when it opens in January 2004.

"As far as expansion goes, these are the biggest projects we've had at UNT in the 22 years I've been here," said Richard Rafe, UNT's vice chancellor, general counsel and vice president of administration.

To date, no significant opposition has surfaced to bulldozing the golf course.

Eric Friden, who's president of Santa Barbara, Calif.-based FHC Hotel Management - which operates the golf club and an adjoining Radisson Hotel - said he's willing to break the lease and is waiting for the company's mortgage lender to agree as well. The hotel would not be affected by UNT's plan for the golf course.

The university recently hired Dallas-based F&S Partners Inc. to draw up a master plan for the redeveloped course.

In addition to a new 500-bed dormitory and dining hall at the site, the plan calls for a $6.5 million athletic center, three football practice fields, an unfunded $30 million football stadium, indoor and outdoor tennis courts, a track-and-field stadium and a slew of facilities for the women's teams.

The first phase of the project will cost $33.5 million and include construction of the athletic center, the dorm and the dining hall.

Last year, the university purchased the buildings and land of Liberty Christian Academy, a 1,000-student private school adjacent to the golf course, for $5.1 million. The UNT athletic department will spend about $3 million to outfit the school's facilities for its women's volleyball, softball and soccer teams.

Rafe also has an oral agreement with Denton-based Newton Rayzor Group to purchase 10 to 12 acres of raw land next to Liberty for further expansion.

In addition to athletic and dormitory uses, the golf-course land is slated for retail development alongside Interstate 35E. There's also preliminary talk about a convention center.

The UNT athletic department has raised about half of what's needed to build the 50,000-square-foot athletic center. Virtually all the center will be paid for privately through donations, Rafe said.

The university recently received regents' approval to sell $27 million worth of bonds to pay for the dorm and dining-hall complex. Construction on the residence hall is expected to begin in June.

Overall, the university is looking to add about 1,300 beds in three new residence halls over the next few years. UNT now has 10 dorms housing 4,500 students.

In 2002, Eagle Point sold about 20,000 rounds of golf, or about half of what's necessary to break even, Friden said. To make it comparable with other courses where his team plays during the season, Jackson said Eagle Point would need improvements of about $7 million to $9 million.

"And that's really not feasible," he said.

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