

## REAL ESTATE

# Life after death: How one Phoenix-area golf course is getting rebrand, rebirth

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Arizona Republic

Published 6:10 a.m. MT March 26, 2024 | Updated 6:10 a.m. MT March 26, 2024

Golf is planned to return to a long-neglected former course in southwest Phoenix, along with new housing.

Southern Ridge Golf Club, located at 59th Avenue and Baseline Road in Laveen, has been closed for more than five years, and the former course has languished with overgrown weeds and dead plants. Before it was called Southern Ridge, the course was called Bougainvillea.

The new ownership group, Laveen 140, bought the land in 2022, and at first decided to remove and redevelop the golf course into smaller pockets of open space, like pickleball courts, playgrounds, dog parks and sports courts.

That proposal was met with “complete hostility,” said Adam Baugh, attorney representing the development with Withey Morris Baugh.

The neighbors strongly opposed the plan, which would eliminate golf and build about 800 housing units on the site.

“We misjudged the importance of the golf course,” Baugh said. “When the owner bought it, all he saw was an abandoned course.”

After the community soundly rejected any plan that would remove the golf course, Baugh said the group went back to the beginning to create a plan that would modify, but preserve, golf on the site. It was important for the community, Baugh said, that golf would return before other developments opened.

The neighbors surrounding the course have more sway in the project than a typical neighborhood would when it comes to new development. An existing agreement between the

homeowner association and the golf course requires two-thirds of homeowners to sign off on approval of the project before the city can approve it.

The development team has secured enough signatures from homeowners to move forward with the plan.

## **Golf course will need overhaul**

Returning golf operations to the site will require an overhaul of the course and its infrastructure. Pumps in the lakes are broken and the irrigation system isn't functional.

"The course has been owned by five different owners," Baugh said. "It shows that course has struggled."

After the plan was rejected, the group went back to the drawing board and brought on Forrest Richardson, a Phoenix-based golf architect who has worked worldwide on golf courses of all sizes.

They submitted a new plan, called the Score Golf Club at Cottonfields, that decreases the course's coverage to 90 acres, setting aside 50 acres for new homes, which will include single-family detached homes and for-sale townhomes.

The new homes cannot be occupied until the golf course is playable, Baugh said.

"By selling land to homebuilders, it re-injects money into the golf course," he said.

## **New plan adds golf simulators, restaurant**

The new plan for the course creates a total of 20 holes, an 18-hole course with two additional. The renovation will overhaul the clubhouse, add a putting course, golf simulators and a new restaurant.

"We wanted to create a place where residents would want to come and have happy hour," Baugh said.

The Score Golf Club at Cottonfields, and the residential plans around it, still need Phoenix city approval to move forward. Baugh said he expects to present the plan to the Laveen Village Planning Committee this Spring.

Richardson, the golf course architect working on the project, said right-sizing the golf course to match the demands of new players and time constraints can keep a course relevant and

neighbors happy.

“In the rebuild process, we can free up additional land and space,” he said. “You can repurpose courses, keep golf but free up land for other uses.”

Richardson said new courses don't necessarily adhere to the old standard of 18 holes. Often, they are now shorter, with large putting greens where players can come without even playing a full round of golf. Additions like the simulators that will be added at the Southern Ridge redevelopment could cater to both traditional golfers and newer players.

“These things have always been part of golf, but now they're on fire,” he said.

One of his goals is to make golf more inclusive, Richardson said, and said there are opportunities to bring golf and its variations to more people, and encourage activation on golf courses beyond golf, like walking trails or picnic space.

Most of Richardson's work right now is reconfiguring and upgrading existing golf courses, as opposed to building new ones.

## **Resurrecting a dead course is a challenge**

But resurrecting a dead golf course into a functional one is uncommon and comes with challenges, Richardson and other golf course experts said.

“When a course closes, it's because something failed,” he said. “When they do come back, they almost always come back in a different way.”

Like Southern Ridge, courses often have restrictions that require HOA approval to make changes, and homeowners who bought land on a golf course are resistant to allowing the course to be redeveloped, especially into housing.

Even when the city is in control, the move is contentious. In Glendale, the municipal Glen Lakes Golf Course closed and is being developed into houses. The rezoning process took years and put the neighbors at odds with the city over the future of the city-owned course.

The Lakes at Ahwatukee, formerly Ahwatukee Lakes, languished for years and was subject to a court battle before it was ordered to upgrade and reopen.

The former El Caro Golf Club in Phoenix was redeveloped into commercial uses after shuttering, and Vistal Golf Club in Phoenix was bought by homebuilders years after it closed to become single-family homes.

Jon Knudson, a broker with Insight Land who specializes in golf course real estate, said homebuilders and other buyers who might be interested in redeveloping a golf course don't find that it's worth the "bloodbath" that comes from the ire of the surrounding neighbors if the property needs to be rezoned.

"If I had a golf course that was zoned residential, and was asked to sell that property, there would be a considerable amount of people that would want to own it who were not (golf course) operators, but those kinds of opportunities are almost nonexistent," he said.

Most of his customers looking to buy golf course real estate are seeking operating courses that will continue to operate as golf courses, Knudson said. He closed four golf course transactions in Arizona last year, which he said is a busy year for golf course deals.

For defunct courses, it can be an "uphill battle" to get them going again, Knudson said.

"Once a golf course goes defunct, its reputation is marred and even with the rebranding, the challenge of bringing it back is a daunting task," he said.

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