

Sheraton Ferncroft sells golf course for \$13M

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Owners of the Sheraton Ferncroft Resort have sold the hotel's golf course in a \$13 million deal expected to help pay for an indoor water park and extensive renovations to the hotel.

The Ferncroft Country Club regularly hosted professional golf tournaments during the 1980s, but course conditions deteriorated over the years as the resort invested more money on hotel room conditions than greens and fairways.

"The struggle had been between the golf superintendent to maintain the golf course and the hotel management to

maintain the hotel. Over the last 10 years, the hotel won out," said Jim O'Connell of O'Connell Hospitality, which represented the company that owns the hotel, WPH Boston.

The golf course was promoted more as an amenity for hotel guests, like a swimming pool or hot tub, rather than its own separate entity. After its sale is finalized, the country club will be completely separate from the hotel and run by Virginia-based Affinity Golf Management.

"We've heard the stories about when the club was in its glory years, hosting the LPGA Boston Five Classic for 10 years," said Damon DeVito, managing director for Affinity.

Affinity wants to focus the country club on golf, DeVito said. Instead of booking tee times through hotel receptionists and carting food from the hotel kitchen, the owners plan to design a central, two-floor clubhouse with locker rooms, offices and dining areas. They also plan to upgrade The 19th Hole restaurant and lounge.

And the days of free access for hotel guests are over, he said.

The Sheraton Ferncroft's owners will use money from the sale to help pay for dramatic improvements at the resort: a top-to-bottom renovation of the hotel and a 55,000-square-foot indoor water park in Middleton, expected to be the first of its

kind in the region.

"That's the best thing for the sellers, because effectively they get an improved facility," O'Connell said.

Under WPH Boston, the country club had 325 members. The new owners plan to cap membership at 400 and signed up more than 100 during a membership drive last week, DeVito said.

Affinity plans to complete some course renovations, including fixing drainage problems, before the start of golf season.

"We're going to have to spend money before we ask them to spend money," DeVito said.

The 18-hole course — the front nine sits mostly in Middleton, the back nine in

Topsfield — was designed by Robert Trent Jones Sr. The architect created more than 300 golf courses around the world and redesigned more than 100 others, including a couple of holes at Augusta National in Georgia, the site of the Masters.

Some consider the Ferncroft Country Club one of the top courses in the area, and its new owners are hopeful it can return to the days when it attracted the spotlight of the LPGA.

"I think conditions are going to come back to that (level)," said Toby Ahern, the club's director of golf. "To hold a regional event like a state open would be one of the immediate goals."

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