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NOVEMBER 2016

Golf's New Public Face

Two new courses in the Southwest are changing the image of what municipals "should" look like.

Pictured: Junior golfers at Rockwind Community Links, Hobbs, N.M.

Getting Serious About Casual Grilles

Keeping Up with Takeout Trends

Bringing Winter Recreation
Out of Hibernation

Growing New Roots

In our daily search for industry-related items to include in our daily e-newsletter and the news section of our monthly magazine, we inevitably come across reports of local-government meetings where city managers and administrators have been grilled about the performance (or lack thereof) of their town's municipal golf courses. And when we post news items about these situations on our website, we inevitably get comments from someone who wants to know, after reading the item, why municipalities should be spending time, effort and taxpayer dollars on a recreational activity (golf) for which interest among the general public is waning.

That's why it was refreshing to visit the two properties that are featured in this issue's cover story ("Golf's New Public Face," pg. 16)—and even more refreshing to meet and talk with the city officials who have been behind their ambitious development, and who have clearly found a way to see a bigger picture.

Make no mistake, these officials are no different than any other public managers—they're under more pressure and scrutiny than ever before to do more with less, and to avoid any hint of wasting even a dollar of public funds.

But it was encouraging to see, and hear, how they have expanded and balanced their views of what "doing more" entails, and of what does, and does not, constitute a waste.

"My goal is certainly to be able to turn a profit for the city, and I think we can get there over the next five to ten years," says Horacio De Leon, Jr., Assistant City Manager for Laredo, Texas, in discussing the long-term outlook for the Max A. Mandel Municipal Golf Course.

"At the same time," De Leon adds, "we realize that while municipal courses might not always make money, it's about the overall

impact they can have, which can include generating interest in developing hotels and other attractions, improving property values, and establishing the city as a destination."

In Hobbs, N.M., City Manager J.J. Murphy expresses a similar desire for Rockwind Community Links to be "self-sustaining" within five years of last year's opening. And he, like De Leon, thinks "we'll get there."

But Murphy also doesn't measure the ROI for what Hobbs has created solely on Rockwind's balance sheet.

"At our old course, we'd maybe see 100 kids come out to play golf during the summer," he says. "Already, we've seen 5,000 come through The First Tee and other programs we've set up [at Rockwind]."

"That doesn't mean we're going to have 5,000 new golfers," Murphy adds. "But it does mean we've created more awareness about the game and the traits it helps to promote, and that we've given those kids a better chance to take advantage of opportunities that may come up for them later in life."

Perhaps the best thing that both De Leon and Murphy reported was that the rest of the country has clearly taken note of their new approaches; both said they've had many calls from other city managers throughout the country, wanting to know how they were able to bring such ambitious projects to life. "There's a lot of interest in our little crown jewel in the middle of the desert," says Murphy. "Everyone wants to know if it's really true that we created a place that's equally attractive to golfers and non-golfers alike."



It was encouraging to see how the city officials behind the ambitious new municipal golf course properties in Laredo, Texas and Hobbs, N.M., have found a way to see a bigger picture.



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Golf's New Public Face

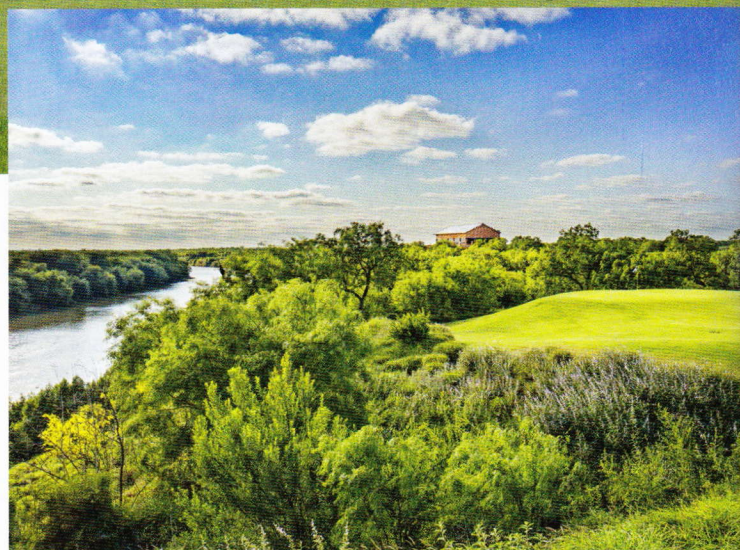
Two new Southwestern courses, “The Max” in Laredo, Texas and **Rockwind Community Links** in Hobbs, N.M., are changing the image of what municipals “should” look like—and the roles they can play in the business.

By Joe Barks, Editor

Laredo, Texas doesn't usually get lumped in with Los Angeles, Chicago or Washington, D.C. when the subject of cities where you'll encounter heavy rush-hour traffic comes up. But every day and night, lines of steady but slow vehicle volume, made up of an equal mix of tractor-trailers and passenger cars packed with commuting workers, crawl in all directions in, around, and through the city of 250,000 that's a little over two hours south of San Antonio.

It's been this way in Laredo for some time. In the 1990s, the city ranked only behind Las Vegas among the fastest-growing U.S. municipalities. The growth stemmed from Laredo's location on the Rio Grande River, across from Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, and how that fortuitous positioning set it up to take the greatest advantage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) when it took effect in that decade.

Today, because of NAFTA, Laredo is the country's largest inland port, with nearly half of the international trade heading from the U.S. to Mexico, and nearly as great a percentage of Mexican export trade, going over its international bridges. “Needless to say, there aren't a lot of [Donald] Trump fans in Laredo,” says Assistant City Manager Horacio De Leon, Jr., referring much more to the presidential candidate's threats



PHOTOS (PG. 16) COURTESY MAX A. MANDEL MUNICIPAL GC (COURSE PHOTO © DAVID SAMSON)

to undo NAFTA than to the aspersions he cast on Hispanics or the promise he made to wall up the border.

Even with Laredo's explosive growth, however, the city failed to get caught up in the Tiger Woods-fueled golf course building boom of the late '90s and early 2000s. In 2004, those who wanted public access to a course in the area still had little to choose from. In his role at the time as Parks & Recreation Director, De Leon began a master-planning initiative that included a survey of residents, and a new golf course emerged as the second-most-desired recreational development project, behind only a water park. De Leon followed up on those results with a feasibility study, using National Golf Foundation guidelines, which indicated that a city of Laredo's size could probably support two more public golf courses than it currently had.

That pushed development of a new course up on the city's agenda—but by the time the project worked its way through administrative channels, the bloom had rapidly fallen off the economy in general, and the golf business in particular.

Laredo pushed ahead with its plans, however—especially after it learned that the family of the late Max A. Mandel, a well-respected local bank executive and civic leader, was pre-



The staffs of the Max A. Mandel Municipal Golf Course (top left, opposite page) and Rockwind Community Links (above right) are taking full advantage of the appeal of their name-designer courses ("The Max"'s Robert Trent Jones II layout, far left, and Rockwind's Andy Staples design, near left) and benefitting from the full backing of their respective city managements.

PHOTOS (PG. 17) COURTESY ROCKWIND COMMUNITY LINKS

pared to jump-start the project with a donation of 280 acres of unspoiled and scenic farmland on the northwestern edge of town, plus water rights (no small consideration in South Texas) and a \$1 million contribution to the cause.

Suddenly, De Leon found himself on the golf world's short list of must-see contacts. At a time when the industry was having over 150 course closures a year, he was the point person for one of only a handful that were coming on stream.

When city-council meetings were held to discuss the project, squadrons of private planes descended on Laredo, carrying representatives from all of the top names in golf course architecture and design. At one point, De Leon even received a call (which he first thought was a friend's prank) from former President George H. W. Bush, who wanted to put in a good word for one designer seeking the contract.

Despite "41"'s efforts, however, the award for creating Laredo's new Max A. Mandel Municipal Golf Course—dubbed "The Max" from the start—went to another bidder, Robert Trent Jones II. Recognizing its good fortune in landing such a top-drawer name during a period when all contractors were so hungry for business, Laredo seized on the opportunity to ramp up the project. The excitement over the course that

Jones created led to a decision to complement it with a larger, and more distinctive, adobe-style clubhouse (see photo, pg. 18) than originally planned.

"While the timing when we started the project was bad for golf in general, it was good for the city," De Leon says. "We built a top-quality facility for \$8 million that would probably cost \$12 to \$13 million today."

Strong Reception

"The Max" opened its golf course for play in late 2012 and earned immediate critical acclaim and prominent spots on "best courses you can play" rankings. The recognition lauded how Jones and his associates took full advantage of the landscape to offer a welcome contrast to South Texas' typically scrubby topography and a serene respite from Laredo's traffic-filled streets. (The property also includes seven miles of walking trails for those who don't want to play golf, and has gained favor with bird-watchers from around the world, after word spread that it was a haven for sightings of in-demand species such as hummingbirds and red-billed pigeons.)

The clubhouse opened to similar praise a year later, boosted by an appearance by famed professional golfer Nancy Lo-



The distinctive adobe-style clubhouse at “The Max” (see photo, above right) includes a second-floor banquet room with sweeping views of the Rio Grande River and indoor and outdoor dining venues offering signature dishes such as salmon nachos.

pez, who now lends continued support to the course and city through an annual Scholarship Invitational.

Through its first full seasons, “The Max” has experienced the need to make some adjustments—the city originally contracted with Foresight Golf for management, but has now switched to Landscapes Unlimited, which was involved with the course construction. As part of that change, a new Golf Course Superintendent, Mark Soto, was brought in to address some turf-cultivation issues that had emerged during the early stages of grow-in.

Aided by a new fertigation system that was installed this year, Soto has drawn on experience he gained at a Troon resort in Honduras and The Gallery Golf Club in Arizona to help “The Max”’s course make up for any lost time and get back on its planned path to full maturity. “Mark is a superstar,” says De Leon, who emphasizes that the city was committed from the start to contracting with management-firm expertise and supporting it with needed resources. “We’ve been blown away by the pride he and his staff have taken to make sure this will never be your normal municipal course.”

“The Max” also has a new General Manager, Dennis Gutierrez, a self-taught golf enthusiast who had been giving lessons while teaching in local schools when he was presented with the opportunity to help direct the new course’s growth.

Since arriving at the property, Gutierrez has focused on player-development initiatives such as “Play Golf Laredo,” a free, five-week program for beginners that is offered several times a year, and on bolstering relationships with local high schools and colleges. (Concurrent with the city’s growth, Texas A&M International University, formerly known as Lar-



“While the timing when we started [The Max] project was bad for golf in general, for the city it was good.”

— Horacio De Leon, Jr.,
Assistant City Manager,
City of Laredo, Texas



AT A GLANCE

Max A. Mandel Municipal Golf Course

Location: **Laredo, Texas**

Opened: **2012**

Golf Course Designer: **Robert Trent Jones II**

Annual Golf Rounds: **19,500**

Clubhouse Size: **9,000 sq. ft.**

Management: **Landscapes Unlimited**

General Manager: **Dennis Gutierrez**

Golf Course Superintendent: **Mark Soto**

Food and Beverage Director: **Lorenzo Serratos**

Assistant General Manager: **Roberto Contreras**

edo State, has experienced rapid expansion of its enrollment and campus facilities, and Gutierrez makes “The Max” available for the Dustdevils’ men’s and women’s golf teams to use for practice around scheduled play.) Already, Gutierrez says, he has been encouraged by the number of new players that the introductory program has spawned, and by how providing access to Jones’ layout has boosted the confidence and ability of the area’s top young players for when they compete at other top courses.

At the same time, Gutierrez has taken steps to spread the word well beyond the city limits about the unique opportunity that Laredo’s new course can offer for public play. These efforts include putting golf packages together for groups of “winter Texans” who converge each year from as far north as Canada to gather in the large RV parks in Texas’ southernmost tip.

Gutierrez once worked for Mark Cuban during the height of the dot-com boom, and he clearly absorbed some of the drive and dream-big ambition that fueled the “Shark Tank” star’s success. “I want to see us become the ‘Bethpage Black of the South,’ ” he says, referring to the A. W. Tillinghast-designed public course on Long Island that is run by the New York State Parks system, has hosted two U.S. Opens, and will be the site of the 2019 PGA Championship.

While Gutierrez doesn’t expect “The Max” to host major championships, and also wouldn’t want the course to be known for the same degree of challenge as Bethpage Black (where signs warn golfers of its difficulty), his desire stems from wanting to put it on the same must-visit level within golfing circles—and beyond. He is equally excited about the possibilities for wedding and banquet business created by the special views (see photo, pg. 16) that the clubhouse and surrounding grounds provide of the Rio Grande, which is much wider and more scenic on “The Max” property than



Rockwind Community Links' new pro shop rivals many private clubs, with a strong emphasis on equipment as well as apparel and other goods. "The shop is putting money in the city's pocket that's never been there before," says General Manager/Head Golf Professional Linda Howell (pictured, above left). The ample supply of equipment also helps Rockwind loan clubs at no charge to those who are first learning the game, she adds.



PHOTOS COURTESY ROCKWIND COMMUNITY LINKS

elsewhere in the city (a walk on downtown Laredo's bridge over the river and into Mexico takes all of five minutes).

Quantum Leap

Nearly 600 miles northwest of Laredo, just over the Texas-New Mexico border, the city of Hobbs, N.M., one-fifth as large as Laredo, already had enough golf courses to suit its size. But when Matt Hughes, Superintendent of the city-run Ocotillo Park Golf Course, which was built in the 1950s on an old Army air base, began to report that the course's irriga-

tion system was fast approaching beyond-repair status, city management saw the opportunity, and need, to do what was required to take golf into the 21st century.

Hobbs' civic leaders were developing a vision and strategy to create and promote state-of-the-art recreational facilities as a key quality-of-life component that could help to establish the city as a desired destination for new businesses and citizens, as well as for visitors. So Hughes was encouraged to help draw up a plan for a brand-new course that would stand out from the ranks of ho-hum municipals offered by

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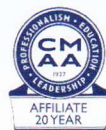


PHOTO BY JOE BARKS, C&RB



Rockwind Community Links has helped The First Tee establish a much stronger presence in the Hobbs region and eastern New Mexico/western Texas, leading to strong participation in developmental programs.

competing locales.

And in Hobbs' case, the city had ample cash at its disposal, thanks to its share of state gross-receipt taxes that it had received, and stockpiled, during peak periods of oil production and prices. The economy of eastern New Mexico, part of the oil-rich Permian Basin, remains heavily dependent on the fate of oil and other energy-related businesses. But oil's downturn in recent years accelerated civic leaders' push to find ways to attract a more diverse business base.

Encouraged to help develop a plan for turning the old Ocotillo layout into a property that would get noticed not only throughout the golf world, but as an area-development lure as well, Hughes' original inquiry about the need to address the failing irrigation system soon led to a response that gave him marching orders to help bring about a complete bulldozing and expansion of the course. Here, too, bringing in a recognized name, and introducing a concept that would attract special notice, were identified as key parts of the plan. And so in May 2015, Hobbs' civic leaders cut the ribbon for the \$12 million rebirth of Ocotillo as Rockwind Community Links, featuring a golf course designed by Andy Staples (who has trademarked the Community Links concept, describing it as "engaging your entire community with the soul of what makes golf invaluable: recreation, health, nature and virtue, [so] a true municipal asset can emerge).

To say that Rockwind has already earned the special notice that was hoped for is an understatement; the course immediately drew praise as a "phenomenal homerun" from PGA Tour star Fred Couples, who learned the game on a municipal course in Seattle. Even more impressively, the United States Golf Association commissioned a six-minute video that it then featured it on its website (www.usga.org), touting Rockwind as a "model muni" that is "more than just a golf

PHOTO COURTESY ROCKWIND COMMUNITY LINKS



Both Rockwind Community Links (pictured above) and "The Max" include public-access walking trails and other amenities designed to maximize community awareness of, and attachment to, the properties.

AT A GLANCE

Rockwind Community Links

Location: **Hobbs, N.M.**

Opened: **May 2015**

Golf Course Designer:

Andy Staples

Annual Golf Rounds: **28,000**

Management:

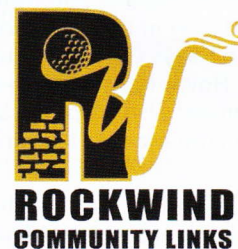
**City of Hobbs
Department of Parks
& Recreation**

General Manager/Head Golf Professional:

Linda Howell

Golf Course Superintendent: **Matt Hughes**

Assistant Golf Professional: **Tripp Gleghorn**



course," serving instead as a "community hub" that is "a blueprint for other municipalities."

Already, golf activity at Rockwind has approached the 33,000-annual-round level that its creators and staff cite as the break-even goal for the course. And community reaction and acceptance of the rebuilt property, which includes walking trails (see photo, bottom left), a public restaurant (operated through a contract) and other amenities, has helped to fuel momentum, and build excitement, for Hobbs' next and even more ambitious project: a 158,000-sq. ft., \$63 million Center of Recreational Excellence, with an indoor water park, sports fields, playground, track, competition and therapy pools, and exercise rooms, that is scheduled to open in 2018.

And while those in Hobbs' city management, like those in Laredo's, stress that profitability is not the overriding goal for what's been created (see "Growing New Roots," pg. 8), the Rockwind staff's concerted effort from day one to use the facility to grow the game and develop new players promises to eventually fill the 5,000-round shortfall that currently exists, even if oil prices stay at their current lows.

"Our focus is on how we can teach kids new life skills and improve the quality of life here, and that's what the city wants," says Linda Howell, who brought extensive experience as both a tennis and golf professional at prominent private clubs and resort properties to her position as Rockwind's General Manager/Head Golf Professional. "When you can serve the community as we're doing, there's no doubt that it will eventually pay off." **C&RB**

For **more photos** of "The Max" and Rockwind Community Links, see the online version of this article at www.clubandresortbusiness.com



PHOTO BY JOE BARKS, C&RB