

Continental Country Club to be sold to homeowners in \$5.7 million deal

By John Henderson
NYT Regional Newspapers

WILDWOOD — Continental Country Club homeowners have signed a contract to purchase the park for \$5.7 million from a company residents have been fighting in court for years.

The contract will not be finalized until accountants have reviewed the park's assets and liabilities and informed residents of the figures.

Some park residents are concerned the deal is moving too swiftly. Some accuse the principals in the deal of withholding information.

"This thing seems to be driven down our throat or ramrodded through," said Hal Treat, a park resident and member of the Sumter County Planning and Zoning Board. "I don't know what to make of it."

But the president of a company that is negotiating the sale, Bob Abel of Community Resources Corp., emphasized that residents have been kept abreast of every aspect of negotiations in numerous meetings. And Abel said no one is being coerced into buying into the park. Abel said every financial detail of the park is being carefully scrutinized by two accountants, one of whom represents the homeowners in a dispute over the park's maintenance and operations fees.

The sale contract with Redman Industries, the Texas company that owns the park, is expected to be finalized some time in June or July, Abel said. Hundreds of residents have signed pledge cards agreeing to pay for stock in the park. The pledges now total more than \$2.5 million. Many plan to use the money they will receive from a court settlement awarded by Judge Ernest Aulls Jr. over the park maintenance fees.

A breakdown of the pledges shows 459 families have pledged \$3,000 toward the purchase of the park, which totals about \$1.4 million. Of that, 302 families have pledged an additional \$4,000 toward a golf-course charter membership. The balance of the purchase price will come from a loan, which Abel said will be paid back with the profits made from the park's assets. There are 780 homes in the park with about 1,500 residents.

Park resident Joan Treat said residents should have been allowed to study the contract in detail before being asked to sign the pledge cards. After demanding a copy of the contract, she said she has reviewed it, and there are disturbing provisions.

Abel said the pledge cards are not binding, and residents can back out of the deal up to the final transaction date.

Some residents say they would feel more comfortable if Chris Jayson, a St. Petersburg attorney who represents homeowners in the lawsuit and has extensive knowledge of the park and its assets, would negotiate the sale instead of Abel.

Abel said Jayson has worked closely with his company in devising the purchase contract. Jayson could not be reached for comment.

Charles Noll, the president of Continental's homeowners association, said Abel was asked to negotiate the sale, because his company has more experience in selling mobile-home parks than Jayson.

The contract requires residents on May 18 to put up \$100,000. The money would be non-refundable after that date. The lawyers then have 75 days to finalize the transaction.

"This thing seems to be driven down our throat or ramrodded through. I don't know what to make of it."

RESIDENT HAL TREAT

Residents who oppose the sale or have serious reservations are holding special meetings this week, according to park resident Roger Hefler.

"In a case like this, I have to know the facts," he said.

The park's profitable assets, according to Abel, include the restaurant, golf course and utilities. The contract gives residents phase three of the park, which has a potential 303 developable lots. It also transfers to residents the ownership of the clubhouse, pool, tennis and shuffleboard courts, streets and the administration building.

Residents are concerned about a proposal that would require them to put up \$4,000 for a charter membership to the golf course, giving them an advantage on tee times and cheaper golf rates. To qualify for the charter membership, residents must pay the \$3,000 to become a park owner. Some residents argue this means they would have to spend \$7,000 to maintain their golf-course privileges — privileges they say were promised when they bought into the park.

Abel said the charter golf-course program is only a proposal, noting residents could change this if they own the park.

On the other hand, if Redman sells the park to another company, Abel said, residents won't have control over the golf course, its fees or programs.

Redman has had the park up for sale for months. If it sold to an outside company, residents would not have control over the type of development planned for the park. Residents could again be subject to ever-increasing maintenance fees if the park were sold to another developer, Abel said.

Redman already increased maintenance fees to \$135.04 in October and has contracted out services like park security to for-profit companies. Abel said as owners, residents could ensure they were getting the best deal possible for the service.

Besides having more of a say in park matters, there is an economic benefit to going with a resident-owned park, Abel said, noting property values tend to increase. And the sale of the park to its residents would once and for all end the years of legal battling over maintenance fees. It would also end the stigma attached to the lawsuit which is hurting the park's image, Abel said.

John Henderson is a reporter for the Daily Commercial in Leesburg.