

Vineyard Golf Club blends into Island landscape

By Nelson Sigelman - October 18, 2007

The entrance to the Vineyard Golf Club is a modest gateway located off the Edgartown-West Tisbury Road just outside of Edgartown. A roadway leads to an elegant wooden clubhouse set against the rolling green fairways of an 18-hole golf course that has earned national recognition for environmental management.

The Vineyard Golf Club, built on the site of a failed 148-house subdivision, opened quietly in 2002. Six years later, the membership rolls are almost full.

But well before the first member ever teed off, the developers of the private club navigated through one of the Island's fiercest regulatory storms in recent memory.



The clubhouse fits into the landscape. Photos by Ralph Stewart

In doing so successfully they outmaneuvered two competing groups of would-be golf course developers who foundered on the shoals of the Martha's Vineyard Commission (MVC) regulatory process.

Early on in the development battle, the club developers forged a strategic business relationship with the Sheriff's Meadow Foundation, a respected Island conservation group that would prove beneficial to both parties.

Ultimately the leaders and many of the prospective members of The Meeting House Golf Club planned for property adjacent to Edgartown Great Pond gave up their quest and agreed to join the Vineyard Golf Club.

The developer of the Down Island Golf Club in what would come to be known as the Southern Woodlands in Oak Bluffs engaged in a long-running battle with the MVC before finally selling much of his property to the Martha's Vineyard Land Bank.

Throughout the long regulatory process, the developers of the Vineyard Golf Club repeatedly promised that the course would be among the most environmentally sensitive ever built and the club would be a contributing member of the Vineyard community.

Over the past several years The Vineyard Golf Club has maintained a low profile as the club leadership has worked to build to full membership and fulfill those earlier promises. It has also managed to blend into the Island's lifestyle and landscape, attracting little of the attention once focused on golf.

Vineyard Golf Club Foundation joins charitable ranks

The Vineyard Golf Club Foundation gives to the Island community in a variety of ways, said foundation president Owen Larkin. Contributions are made in two forms, straight cash donations or golf games donated as auction items.

Each golf club member is asked to contribute a minimum of \$500 annually to the Club's charitable foundation. According to a club press release, since 2002 the foundation has donated a total of almost \$500,000 in cash to various Island organizations and donated golf playing time worth more than \$100,000 outright but far more on the auction block for the benefiting organization.

Many Island organizations receive annual cash donations of between \$2,000 and \$25,000. In 2006 the Foundation agreed to contribute \$100,000 outright to the Martha's Vineyard Hospital's new building campaign and pledged an additional challenge grant. The Foundation will match dollar for dollar gifts made by Islanders to the Islander Appeal up to \$25,000 in any given year.

Organizations that received contributions in 2006 included The Drum Workshop, Pediatric AIDS Foundation, The Farm Institute, Friends of Vineyard Soccer, Martha's Vineyard Boys and Girls Club, Inc., Martha's Vineyard Community Services, Martha's Vineyard Museum, Sail Martha's Vineyard, Sheriff's Meadow Foundation, and Vineyard House.

In 2003, the club also established a scholarship program funded through the sale of prints made from two paintings of the Vineyard Golf Club by renowned Edgartown artist Ray Ellis. Island high school students who have worked for the club a minimum of two years and meet the criteria are eligible to receive a maximum scholarship of \$20,000 dispersed over four years.

For more information on the Foundation, call 508-627-8930 or go to www.vineyardgolf.com.

Sitting in one of the clubhouse dining rooms on a sunny afternoon overlooking the 18th green, Owen Larkin, who was at the club's helm during its tumultuous journey to completion, told *The Times*, "I am really proud of how it came out. It turned out to be what we hoped it would be."

Mr. Larkin was club president until he stepped down in August 2005. He continues to serve on the seven-member board of directors and is president of the Vineyard Golf Foundation, the charitable arm of the club. His wife, Marjorie Reedy Larkin, is vice-president and grant coordinator.

The original three partners in the project included Mr. Larkin, who was the public face of the project, Jay Swanson of Boston, who took over as president, and William VanDevender of Mississippi and West Tisbury, a board member.

The two-story 19,000-square-foot clubhouse is set low against the landscape. Vineyard grasses and plants provide a muted effect that sets off the building's architectural features. Those include interior floors constructed from custom made wide-plank, hand-scraped hickory, natural birch paneling and a comfortable porch where guests can enjoy a drink prior to dinner.

The dining room, which closes for the season this weekend, is comprised of a series of three wood-paneled grill rooms. Sections not in use during the spring and fall shoulder season can easily be closed off. The effect is one of intimacy.

But the menu and the view are off limits to the general public. The club's special permit

restricts use of the dining room to members and guests only.

The bottom floor of the clubhouse houses men and women's locker rooms. There is a special area for washing and sterilizing shoes and equipment as part of the strict environmental management program.

Mr. Larkin was involved with every detail of the construction. He said the goal was to create a building that did not look like a golf club in the conventional sense but a place that was "understated, yet elegant and comfortable."

The club employs approximately 80 employees at the height of the season, including a roster of professional caddies. A walking course, golf carts may be used but only in limited circumstances or for medical reasons.

The club had expected to ride the golf boom launched in the 1990s by the success of Tiger Woods. But the national slowdown in the golf industry affected membership sales.

Currently there are approximately 285 full members. The club bylaws allow for 305 full members. Mr. Larkin expects to reach that goal this year or next.

Although Mr. Larkin would not reveal the price of a full membership, one person familiar with the club said it costs \$300,000 to join plus annual dues.

There are 160 Island members, year-round residents who pay \$500 in annual dues. The only restrictions involve the availability of tee times, but otherwise no distinctions are made between full and Island members. "The diversity of the Vineyard is well represented in this club," Mr. Larkin said.

A membership committee is responsible for selecting Island members from a waiting list of over 200 people. Island members may play anytime after 4 pm seven days a week. There are four tee times available to Island members during the day.

The entire property is 235 acres. The club provides 52 beds for employees, distributed among various buildings on the grounds

The upper level of the clubhouse includes three apartment suites that were originally intended to be six guest bedrooms available for rent to club members and guests. The Edgartown zoning board of appeals eliminated the bedrooms when it granted the club a special permit in January 2000.

The golf club plan originally presented to the MVC included plans for 15 member houses. In June 1999 the MVC voted to approve the Vineyard Golf Club but added more than 20 conditions.

They included the rejection of the houses, a condition that was not discussed in public session with the developer or underpinned by a staff recommendation but arose during a casual discussion of the conditions that would be added to the project prior to the vote to approve.

According to the public record, Lenny Jason of Chilmark, Edgartown building inspector and a MVC member at the time, suggested that the houses be eliminated because the course was designed for people who live on the Island.

After some confusion and discussion, the commission voted 11-1 with four abstentions to condition the project so that all housing would be for golf club employees only.

Mr. Larkin said that condition came out of the blue.

Rather than appeal, he decided to go forward and return to the MVC at a later date.

In July of this year, the Vineyard Golf Club applied to the MVC to modify the original condition and build nine member houses. According to MVC staff the request is currently on hold. Mr. Larkin said the club is still in the process of preparing its application.

The golf course is a par 72. According to club literature, the course design "encourages bump and run golf with open green entrances, no forced carries and fairways of generous width."

Throughout the regulatory process, Mr. Larkin insisted that the course he and his partners intended to build would be the most environmentally sensitive course in the United States. Although many opponents dismissed the claim as development hyperbole, Mr. Larkin appears to have made good on his promise.

It is an accomplishment he thinks is not fully appreciated on the Vineyard but one of which he is quite proud. "Nobody does what we do," he said.

Some of the biggest challenges involve enemies of green lawns familiar to homeowners and landscapers across the Vineyard: weeds and grubs that eat the grass roots, and the skunks that tear up lawns in an effort to eat the grubs.

Mr. Larkin said the club is working with a professor at the University of Massachusetts to find a way to use nematodes, a small worm, as a means of controlling grubs. He said it costs the club \$14 an hour for a laborer to weed by hand because the club does not use chemicals.

The club's environmental stewardship has brought it national recognition. In January the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA) board of directors will present course superintendent Jeff Carlson with its 2008 President's Award for Environmental Stewardship.

In a press release the international organization said it chose Mr. Carlson "because he has chosen a different path of golf course management and has effectively communicated its virtues to the members of Vineyard Golf Club so that he has their full support."

As part of its original agreement, the Sheriff's Meadow Foundation (SMF) continues to exercise environmental oversight over some areas of the golf club, in particular a 25-acre frost bottom that is protected from any development.

Dick Johnson, SMF director who meets regularly with Mr. Carlson, said SMF has been very pleased with the club's environmental stewardship. "They've really done a good job and it has not been easy for them," he said. "They really are organic in a way that nobody thought they could do."