



JILL TORRANCE, ARIZONA DAILY STAR 2010

The Golf Club at Vistoso in 2010. Today, the greens and fairways are “not real pretty,” says one member of Preserve Vistoso.

Course

From A1

He said his organization has purchased old golf courses in the past, but it’s not a big part of what they do. He was skeptical when Preserve Vistoso first contacted him about their idea.

“I was concerned it was going to be a handful of NIMBY landowners,” trying to keep more houses from being built around them, Ford said. “It turned out to be way more than that.”

The golf course property features impressive views of the Catalina Mountains, “phenomenal native vegetation” and surprising archaeological resources, including petroglyphs that are visible from at least one fairway, Ford said. “The day I was there, there were deer running around the course.”

Preserve Vistoso, meanwhile, proved to be an active and engaged bunch, with a membership list that recently topped 2,000 people.

Ford said Oro Valley officials were also eager to help with the transaction, especially after so many residents rallied in opposition to Romspen’s rezoning proposal.

An initial round of negotiations ended in failure in 2020, when the two sides could not agree on a purchase price for the 208-acre site. By then, Preserve Vistoso had already collected \$1.5 million in pledges and donations for the effort.

“We were despondent when it failed the first time,” Sturmon said.

Putt for dough

The second round of talks, spurred on by town leaders earlier this year, resulted in an agreement that carves out 6 acres already zoned for high-density development where the golf course’s clubhouse, restaurant and parking lot now stand.

Ford said Romspen would keep that land to sell to a local builder, most likely for a townhouse or



MIKE CHRISTY AND RICK WILEY, ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Then: A golfer retrieves his ball from the cup on the third hole at the Golf Club at Vistoso in May 2018, shortly before the course was closed. Now: By October 2021, there is little evidence that the third hole existed.

apartment development.

The Conservation Fund would buy the remaining 202 acres, then donate it to the town of Oro Valley for open space and “low-impact recreational use,” he said.

A conservation easement would be placed on the land — and held in trust by a separate entity — to “prohibit any kind of development there in perpetuity,” Ford said.

Of course, all of this is contingent on money.

Preserve Vistoso officially launched its second fundraising campaign Oct. 12 and collected more than \$250,000 in the first week. The group has set a Dec. 15 deadline to raise the rest of the \$1.8 million.

Ford is hoping many of the people who pledged the last time around will chip in even more this time, now that there’s an agreement in place with the property owner.

“We’re receiving cash donations and pledges every day,” he said. “I’m cautiously optimistic that we’ll make that goal.”

According to Preserve Vistoso, the golf course winds through 17 residential developments, with an estimated 6,000 people living within walking distance of the property.

It won’t take much to open the site to the public. The proposed preserve already features 6 miles of wide, fully accessible concrete trails, with under-

passes beneath major roads in the neighborhood.

There are also three restrooms already in place that could be reopened without too much effort, MacKay said. “There’s literally millions of dollars of infrastructure on this course.”

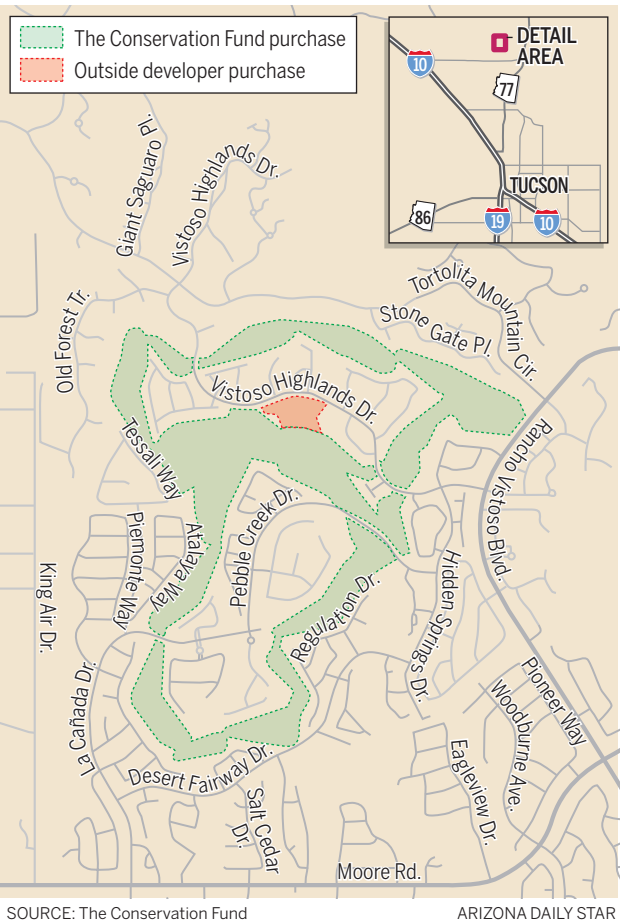
Small shade structures and picnic tables could be added later, but the proposed easement would bar any high-traffic recreation amenities such as ball fields or an outdoor events venue.

“There are people who would rather have houses built behind them than an amphitheater,” MacKay said.

“It’s natural for people to worry about a thing like that, but it’s not going to happen,” Sturmon added.

Changing course

If they can raise \$1.8 million by the end of the year, a group of Oro Valley residents and national nonprofit The Conservation Fund plan to buy the abandoned Golf Club at Vistoso and turn it into a 202-acre desert nature preserve. Under the deal, 6 acres would be sold to an outside developer for a multifamily residential project.



Tough up and down

There are some key details that still need to be worked out, including where people would go to park and gain access to the cart-paths-turned-walking-trails now that the golf course’s main lot is destined for private development.

Some of the landscape would need work as well.

The course’s neatly manicured playing surfaces are long dead, revealing patches of dried mulch choked with brush. A picturesque pond that once served as the backdrop for weddings is now a dry hole collecting tumbleweeds.

“In the areas where there were greens and fairways, it’s not real pretty,” MacKay said.

Luckily, the natural desert was an integral part of the golf course’s design, he

said, so “about 70% of it was never touched.”

For the rest, there are a number of state and federal grant programs available that could be used to replace the former fairways, greens and practice areas with native plants.

Otherwise, visitors to the preserve will just have to wait for nature to take its course.

“The desert is going to win eventually,” MacKay said.

To make a donation or learn more about Preserve Vistoso’s effort to establish a nature park at the Golf Club at Vistoso, go to the group’s website: [www.preservevistoso.org](http://www.preservevistoso.org).

Contact reporter Henry Brean at [hbrean@tucson.com](mailto:hbrean@tucson.com) or 573-4283. On Twitter: @RefriedBrean

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