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School gets land in 2012 deal; Ol' Colony, PARA save money on new lease with state agency

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Published: Monday, January 20, 2014 at 11:00 p.m.

A deal that will save Ol' Colony Golf Complex and the Tuscaloosa County Park and Recreation Authority at least \$150,000 per year could also provide a site for a new city school.

The Ol' Colony board of directors and PARA renegotiated a lease with the state of Alabama and the Alabama Department of Mental Health for the 600-acre tract near Sokol Park where the golf course was built.



Staff graphic | Anthony Bratina

Details of the agreement emerged during a city Board of Education retreat on Saturday.

Jerry Plott, chairman of the Ol' Colony board, said the deal, which was completed in December 2012, eliminated an annual \$150,000 payment to the Department of Mental Health that was scheduled to increase in years to come.

The agreement sets aside a 36-acre tract that could be used for a new school at no cost to the City Board of Education.

The lease agreement between PARA and the Department of Mental Health dates back to Ol' Colony's origins in the late 1990s.

With \$3 million each from the Tuscaloosa City Council and the Tuscaloosa County Commission, PARA built the 18-hole golf complex on 250 acres of the original 600-acre tract.

Another 18 holes were planned, but that has now been whittled to nine holes on 125 acres.

Part of the original agreement required PARA to pay \$150,000 annually to lease the entire tract for 15 years. After that, a percentage of Ol' Colony's revenues would be added to that base payment until the total payment to Mental Health had risen to \$450,000 by the final year of the lease in 2079.

However, Ol' Colony Golf Complex has never earned the revenues that were forecast when PARA decided to build it. It has operated with an annual deficit ranging between \$417,232 and \$42,360 from fiscal 2003 to fiscal 2012.

And in fiscal 2013, after closing for four summer months for upgrades, the complex ended the fiscal year with a deficit of about \$375,000.

"I don't think there's any recreational programs ... that make a profit. It's just recreational opportunity that governments fund to provide those (services) ...," said

Plott, who was serving as president of the Tuscaloosa City Council when it was decided to build the complex. “But as the years go on, we should have no problem getting to where it’s more profitable out there.”

Because the Tuscaloosa city and county governments are the primary funding sources for PARA, local tax dollars were subsidizing the golf course’s operations.

To eliminate the need for the annual subsidy, PARA and Ol’ Colony approached the Department of Mental Health and Gov. Robert Bentley about returning 225 acres of the 600-acre tract to the department in exchange for dropping the need for the annual lease payment.

“PARA, and we, wanted to keep as much land as we could but still get rid of the lease payments,” Plott said. “We knew that if it wasn’t fair to the state, Gov. Bentley wasn’t going to go along with it.”

After several rounds of negotiating, the parties decided that four parcels along Watermelon Road would be returned to the Department of Mental Health to sell for private development. An appraisal indicated these were the most valuable parcels with the tract.

The department also wanted the 36-acre tract, which is next to Northridge High School and Verner Elementary and near Rock Quarry elementary and middle schools and was appraised at \$3.6 million. But PARA resisted turning it over and proposed that it be reserved for a public use.

Bentley offered a compromise: The tract would be set aside for use as a public school. If school construction has not begun within four years, the tract would revert to the Department of Mental Health to use as it wished. The \$150,000 (and growing) annual lease payment, however, would remain eliminated.

The amended lease agreement was signed in December 2012 by Bentley, PARA officials and Jim Reddoch, commissioner of the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

Gary Minor, PARA executive director, agreed with Plott that the main goal of the deal was to save local governments — and taxpayers — money, but benefitting the school system was a welcome addition.

“I wish we could’ve saved more of (the land), but I feel we did the very best to get the best deal for PARA and Tuscaloosa,” Minor said. “As far as Tuscaloosa citizens are concerned, saving that \$150,000 a year means less subsidies we have to generate some other way for Ol’ Colony.”

Mayor Walt Maddox said he was aware the negotiations were ongoing but that he was never asked to take part.

But the North Ridge Road land’s potential, he said, should be considered.

“It’s a very rare opportunity for the Board of Education to look at several options while they look at their comprehensive plan,” Maddox said. “In this situation, finding 36 acres of property adjacent to three school facilities in a high intense growth area, those opportunities don’t present themselves very often.”

Plott, though, said that data would be the deciding factor on whether a school is built on the available site.

“It’s a good deal, but if (the school board’s) due diligence says they don’t need a school there, then that’s fine, too,” Plott said. “You need a to build a school where it’s needed, not where politics wants it.”

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