

Editorial

NOT PAR FOR THE COURSE

CALAVERAS COUNTY OFFICIALS MUST RESOLVE A DIFFICULT DISPUTE

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Now comes the hard part for Calaveras County's supervisors: what to do about Trinitas.

How could any project so beautiful be so messed up?

Three small lakes, a 100-year-old olive orchard, gently rolling hills studded with oak trees and a world-class golf course have prompted a major controversy because of an environmental impact report.

The Ridge at Trinitas Golf Course is the vision of 37-year-old Mike Nemeo, who sold his home in Stockton's Morada neighborhood in 2001 to purchase a 280-acre ranch on Ospital Road in western Calaveras County.

Nemeo converted 95 of those acres into an 18-hole golf course that has drawn attention and praise for its natural setting, rolling topography and challenging layout.

The course - and the way in which Nemeo built it under the regulatory radar - has generated local opposition.

Somehow, Nemeo had the Ridge at Trinitas constructed without an environmental review being done by county officials.

Now that he wants to add a lodge and a 13-home gated community to his project, everybody's paying attention.

And everybody is wondering how he got this far without any governmental oversight and a process that was anything but par for the course.

In November, Calaveras County supervisors will consider whether to add the golf course to the environmental impact report on the project. They'll be trying to go back to a base line that no longer exists.

Nemeo, meanwhile, has been told to put his plans on hold until he obtains a proper permit. And to stop using the golf course.

Sixty of his neighbors have joined Keep It Rural Calaveras. A Web site, MyValleySprings.com, includes the latest developments in the conflict between Nemeo and those who live nearby.

Their main concern is over depletion of the aquifer in an area already where a shortage of water already is a problem.

It won't be easy for supervisors to sort this out.

In 2001, when Nemeo purchased the property, he maintains county planning officials told him it was acceptable to build a private-use golf course on agricultural preserve land.

That raises two questions - one each to haunt Nemeo and Calaveras officials:

» At what point did Nemeo decide to open his 18-hole golf course to the public? Or did he always plan to do that?

» Who in county government gave the conflicting signals? The planning and building departments since have been combined to avoid this from occurring again.

At least one Calaveras official, planner Dan Hendrycks, wrote a letter in August 2001 to Nemeo telling him his project was illegal.

Even that raises another question:

» Why didn't county officials more properly monitor the enormous undertaking at Ospital Road and Live Oak Lane between Highways 12 and 26?

So many impacts must be considered or reconsidered by the supervisors: traffic, air pollution and groundwater overdraft. It's too late to protect the environment or native habitats that might have been harmed.

Yet Trinitas is there in all its golfing glory.

It's hard to imagine county officials ordering Nemeo to tear out the golf course. Maybe a new environmental review will list after-the-fact mitigations Nemeo must undertake.

Or the supervisors could leave the Ridge at Trinitas in place and reject plans for the a lodge and 13 homes instead. Maybe they could use any new data as leverage for more road improvements.

Whatever happens, one side or another won't be pleased. Litigation likely would follow.

Nemeo should have sought more definitive approval six years ago.

Calaveras County officials, no matter how overworked or understaffed they were or are, needed to recognize the impact and magnitude of what he was proposing - and what it might evolve into.

Right now, that's a big mess for which there appears to be no hole-in-one resolution.

It's their valley

It's a difficult balancing act for government officials in Calaveras County because so many issues are unresolved in the matter of the Trinitas Golf Course and other projected homes and facilities:

- **General Plan:** Overhauling the state-mandated document has been so time-consuming that officials found themselves delaying construction projects large and small.
- **General Plan II:** At a workshop Tuesday, several supervisors said they would like to see the Ahwahnee Principles incorporated into the General Plan. The principles call for building energy-efficient, compact and pedestrian-friendly communities.
- **Sewer capacity:** New housing development in San Andreas is hung up between the need for plant expansion and the protocol to pay for it. The 133-home Saddleback Hills is one of the affected projects. It's likely to be approved.
- **The future:** Residents of Valley Springs get a chance Saturday (9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Valley Springs Elementary) to participate in a community design workshop. Tired of waiting on professional planners, MyValleySprings.com hosted a workshop Wednesday to chart future growth.