

NOV 21 2005

Golf course project hits the rough for Pierce County Council

The Pierce County Council might halt spending on the Chambers Creek golf course project until it reconciles questions about related costs.

BY AARON CORVIN
The News Tribune

Members of the Pierce County Council are preparing to freeze spending on projects related to the proposed waterfront golf course while they sort out a controversy over the cost.

Last week, council members vented their frustration after learning that County Executive John Ladenburg wants to spend \$3.8 million from the sewer fund beginning next year to cover lighting, an access road and a trail for the golf course, parks and other projects planned at the

930-acre area in University Place known as Chambers Creek Properties.

Council members said they thought golf course infrastructure costs were included in the \$20.8 million construction package they approved in September to build the golf course. And they questioned why the Ladenburg administration signed a contract to spend \$3 million next year before telling the council.

Council members say they have asked a deputy county prosecutor to examine whether contracting procedures were followed.

Today, the council is expected to consider amendments that freeze spending on multiple Chambers Creek projects worth a total of at least \$10 million, according to council Chairman Shawn Bunney (R-Lake Tapps) and Councilman Calvin Go-

ings (D-Puyallup). The two said the projects can be reinstated, but only after the council gets some answers.

Ladenburg said Saturday that he wasn't aware a deputy prosecutor was looking into the contract, and he had not seen the council's budget-freezing amendments.

Please see GOLF COURSE, back page

GOLF COURSE

CONTINUED FROM A1

He said much of the confusion stems from council members and a News Tribune story last week missing the big picture: The \$3.8 million would pay for infrastructure serving the entire 930-acre Chambers Creek site, not just the 250-acre golf course.

As for the contract, Ladenburg said he explained to council members last week that it saves taxpayers money by consolidating projects and that it contains an "out clause," which would cancel the infrastructure projects if the council doesn't approve them.

Ladenburg said he understood the council wanted him to present the cost of the golf course separately from other infrastructure projects that have been planned for the entire site for years, so that's what he did.

COUNCIL: SURPRISED BY BUDGET REQUEST

At Ladenburg's request, the council voted 6-1 in September to borrow \$20.8 million to build an 18-hole, Scottish links course that appeals to high-end golfers. The money is to be repaid through golf course revenue – and if that's not enough, then through sewer revenue and the county's general fund.

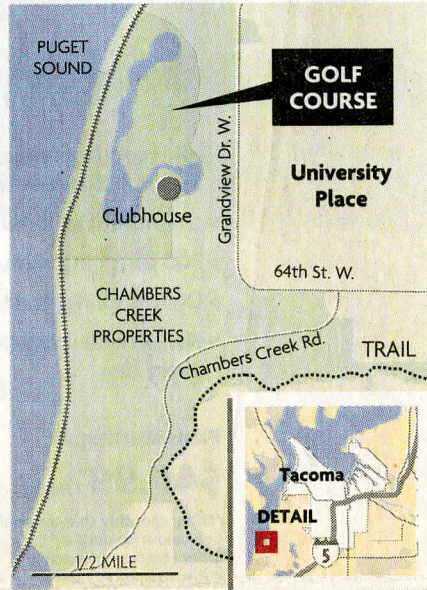
Four of the seven council members said last week that they believed infrastructure costs were included in the \$20.8 million construction package.

"I thought we were buying an operational golf course," Chairman Bunney said. "I thought we had a turn-key golf course."

Goings said "a large portion of the \$3.8 million is vital to the golf course's success. What the council needs to deter-

CHAMBERS CREEK PROPERTIES

Pierce County Executive John Ladenburg wants to build a 250-acre, 18-hole Scottish links-style golf course as part of a plan to rejuvenate the 930-acre Chambers Creek Properties, a former gravel mine with a waterfront view.



The News Tribune

mine is what portion and who should pay the bill for that."

Councilman Dick Muri (R-Steilacoom) – the only one of the seven council members to vote against publicly financing the golf course – said the \$20.8 million bonding package should have been "\$24 million or \$25 million" to reflect its true cost.

Councilman Roger Bush (R-Graham) said the council first learned of the infrastructure costs last week.

NOV 21 2005

"I think this raises it a few million dollars, obviously," he said of the golf course project.

The council's concerns flared up last Tuesday during a budget hearing with Brian Ziegler, public works director for Ladenburg's administration.

As they reviewed budget documents, some council members were surprised to see a request to tap the sewer fund for at least four Chambers Creek projects worth a combined \$7 million.

They questioned the projects' relationship to the golf course and why the money would come from the sewer fund, which is financed mostly by ratepayers in unincorporated Pierce County.

Part of their attention focused on a proposal to spend \$3 million next year on three projects: \$1.1 million for "site infrastructure," \$1.1 million for an entry road and \$889,000 for "Soundview Trail."

Some council members were surprised to learn that Ladenburg's administration put those three projects into the contract with Heritage Links of Houston to build the golf course without telling them about the need.

Ziegler told the council that if it doesn't approve the lighting and entry road projects, "then we don't have electricity and gas to run a golf course, and we don't have a road to get people to the golf course."

On Friday, Ziegler told The News Tribune that communication could have been better between the county's legislative and executive branches: "Both the council and the executive branch could have done better on this."

LADENBURG: LOOK AT THE BIG PICTURE

In interviews on Thursday and Saturday, Ladenburg said his administration has not tried to figure out how much of

the \$3.8 million is for the golf course because the infrastructure projects serve the broader development of the Chambers Creek site, which is a former gravel pit that now looks like a rocky wasteland.

He said the council wanted to independently examine the golf course, so that's how he presented it.

"We had numerous conversations," he said when asked if the council understood that some costs were separate. "It's disingenuous for them to say they were surprised."

Ladenburg said a "back-of-the-envelope estimate" showed he saved the county \$562,000 by signing one contract instead of separate contracts for certain projects. But if the council objects, the projects can be deleted through an "out clause" in the contract. "These are standard in government contracts," he said, adding that council members are "not as conversant" with such contracts.

Ladenburg noted that the county's sewer utility owns Chambers Creek Properties and is required to revive the site.

The county already has made some improvements to the site, including ball fields and trails. His plan for a championship-caliber golf course is designed to speed up the site's 50-year development plan by generating revenue.

Ladenburg said the county still would build an access road, lighting, a trail, parks and other amenities throughout the site even if it wasn't building a golf course.

"I would be recommending building each one of them if there wasn't a golf course," he said.

Councilman Muri doubts it. "Clearly," he said, "if the golf course wasn't being built we wouldn't be building these."

Muri said the golf course was supposed to pay for other amenities at the site.

"That's how it's been sold," he said. "To

reclaim the land, build the golf course that's a moneymaker so we get all of these other things on the wish list."

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Today, the council is expected to recommend freezing spending on multiple Chambers Creek projects worth a combined total of at least \$10 million, including the \$3.8 million worth of infrastructure and trail projects. Bunney said he's confident the votes are there for the freeze.

Those recommendations are expected to go to a final vote of the council Tuesday when it wraps up the county's 2006 budget.

Meanwhile, Bunney and Councilman Bush confirmed that Doug Vanscoy, the county's chief civil attorney, is examining whether contracting rules were followed. Vanscoy was out of town and could not be reached for comment.

Bunney said part of the decision to freeze some of the projects is "to ensure contracting procedures were followed."

Bunney said he likes Ladenburg's plan to develop the Chambers Creek site into a regional gem for the public.

He said the broader discussion is about understanding the funding scenarios and how quickly the county should spend public dollars on a 50-year plan to rejuvenate the Chambers Creek site.

"The whole thing is a great project," Bunney said, but the council took a "tough vote on \$20 million that it would be turn-key."

He added: "I give the executive and his people the benefit of the doubt, but we want to do our due diligence. The public is due an examination of this issue."

Aaron Corvin: 253-552-7058

aaron.corvin@thenewstribune.com