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Facelift on tap for Oaks

By [Rich Shopes](#)

SARASOTA COUNTY -- The Oaks Club, an exclusive country club that derives almost all its dues from nearby homeowners, has approved a \$5.5 million upgrade to the golf course -- one of the costliest ever in Southwest Florida.

Ballots unsealed Thursday showed 78 percent of voting members -- roughly 355 -- backed plans to overhaul the 20-year-old course next spring and summer.

Another \$3.6 million will be set aside to improve the Georgian-style clubhouse, including the kitchen, bar and dining room.

"In this market, and after 20 years, you need to upgrade your facility if you want to remain a vital club," said Sandy Cooper, president of The Oaks Club. "There will be changes to every element of the golf course."

The renovation comes as private and public courses are turning ever more frequently to pricey improvements to keep up with existing and newer courses such as The Ritz-Carlton, The Concession and The Founders Club.

In November, members at Laurel Oak backed plans for a \$4.2 million upgrade after The Meadows wrapped up \$2 million worth of renovations at its course. Before that, El Conquistador enacted a \$2.5 million upgrade.

The Oaks project trumps all others, though.

Among the planned changes are new tees and greens, an improved drainage system and new irrigation. The intent is to make the course "more interesting and more strategic," Cooper said.

Noted golf course architect Arthur Hills, designer of The Sanctuary on Sanibel Island and the Half Moon Bay Ocean Course in California, is overseeing the changes.

Residents at the 500-unit Oaks subdivision will pay for the upgrade through one-time assessments and higher quarterly dues.

Cooper would not say how much that comes to. Residents now pay roughly \$56,000 each year to play golf at The Oaks. Not all Oaks homeowners hold golf memberships but all belong to the club. Some join to play tennis and dine at the clubhouse.

Linda Talbot, executive director of the Suncoast Golf Course Association, said the upgrade could signal a dangerous trend.

"I like The Oaks and no one would deny anyone the rights of property owners to upgrade their golf course," she said. "But I have to say I'm really concerned about what this is doing to the game itself."

"The everyman's course is disappearing."

General Manager Steve Geisler, who joined The Oaks 21/2 years ago, said that what's happening in Sarasota is no different than in Naples and other resort areas. Compared with private clubs in Naples and other cities, he said, The Oaks "is still a bargain."

In addition, the improvements "will increase the quality of the experience for the members while at the same time add value to their memberships."
