

SPECIAL EDITION



“BUY THE CLUB”

By highlighting the intense development happening right outside our gates, MPCA can frame the purchase of the club not merely as a golf course acquisition, but as an urgent, grant-worthy effort to save one of the last major green corridors and water management systems in a rapidly growing city.

Buy the Club?

The very bad news: if you're an avid golfer and moved here from 1000's of miles away, uprooting charmed lives like Karla and I did **for the golf**, and very little other than that, **and** don't have an open mind or understand that our world behind the gates has changed forever and the old one is not coming back, STOP READING HERE AND GO TO THE DRIVING RANGE. Or, hang on till the end of this; as every golfer knows, *hope springs eternal* (!)

I, for one, never expected this. Golf coverage, the Women's and Couple's Leagues and Christian's 'Playing Through' are a big part of each issue, not to mention the other 'fun' golf-themed stuff now and then. We hope to have some, or whatever, part of that continue, if slightly reimagined, in future issues. But what else? Reports on 'Tree Hugging Tournaments', or 'Model Saiboat Racing on Pond #31'? And let's not forget 'Asparagus Growing 2.0', right?

The very good news: the current environmental features and layout of the course means that the landscape would naturally support some valuable alternative uses to consider if golf operations as presently configured were 'reconfigured'. To begin, here's a game plan, in broad terms:

Objectives

"Forever Wild" Set-Asides - As mentioned, the grounds are already defined by their deep integration with local ecology, making them highly suitable for a nature preserve or conservation set-aside. We call Magnolia Point's 1,000-acres heavily wooded with "magnificent oaks, magnolia trees and tall pines". The landscape we describe as "abundant with wildlife," is a teeming habitat for wild turkey, deer, hawks, alligator, waterfowl, snakes, turtles, and occasional bald eagles. The course also contains natural water features and wetlands and marsh. Allowing these areas to revert to a "forever" or perhaps "mildly wild" state would naturally foster this existing ecosystem.

Walking Trails - The architectural layout of the golf course features "no parallel fairways". As seen on the property map, the 18 holes wind individually throughout the residential areas, water features, and natural backdrops, rather than sitting side-by-side in the usual large grid. Because of this tranquil, winding design, the existing fairway corridors and cart paths could naturally transition into an extensive, scenic network of walking or biking trails for residents.

Community Gardens and Recreation Spaces - While communal gardens are not explicitly mandated, the community already has dedicated areas for non-golf outdoor activities that could be expanded. The club currently maintains an "Activity Zone" adjacent to the pool, which includes sand volleyball, a pickleball court, and a playground for children. Furthermore, the driving range, practice putting green, and chipping areas have great potential. If the MPCA chooses to discontinue golf as it presently exists, these centralized, already-cleared practice areas could potentially be repurposed into community gardens or expanded multi-use recreational zones.

Leveraging Our 38 Ponds for Conservation Incentives - Golf courses naturally function as massive water filtration sites that absorb and infiltrate rain while capturing and cleansing runoff in urban and suburban areas. Because the MPCA already maintains its interconnected ponds in excellent condition and works closely with the Water Management District, these ponds can be formalized as a highly valuable Surface Water Management System (SWMS).

To help the MPCA offset the costs of purchasing and maintaining the club property, we can exploit state and federal conservation programs by transitioning parts of our 1,000-acre footprint from traditional golf operations into dedicated natural amenities. Here is a multi-pronged strategy integrating conservation easements, government grants, and community-driven funding.

Continued



Strategies

1. Establish a Conservation Easement for Financial Relief: Buy the property, and we can place a conservation easement on the ecologically sensitive portions of the golf course, and benefit from tax advantages and sustainable development opportunities.

The Legal Precedent: A recent 11th Circuit Court of Appeals decision (*Champions Retreat Golf Founders, LLC v. Commissioner*) established that conservation easements across golf courses are eligible for significant charitable tax deductions, provided the land protects a "relatively natural habitat of fish, wildlife, or plants". MPCA could partner with a recognized local land trust (such as the **North Florida Land Trust**) to hold an easement over the undeveloped, wooded, or repurposed "forever wild" areas. This limits future development in perpetuity while potentially providing significant tax benefits or direct compensation that can offset the purchase price.

2. Partner with Local Government for LWCF and Florida Forever Grants: Because the golf and tennis facilities are already open to the public, the MPCA could throw in with Green Cove Springs or Clay County, or both, to apply for major state and federal grants to fund the acquisition and redevelopment of the land.

Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF): This federal program provides competitive 50/50 matching grants of up to \$1.5 million for land acquisition and up to \$1.5 million for developing outdoor public recreation. LWCF funds can be used to convert the aging golf cart paths into public hiking and biking trails, or to upgrade the existing tennis courts, swimming pool, and "Activity Zone" playgrounds. Note: Because only local governmental entities are eligible to apply, the MPCA would need to establish a formal partnership with the city or county, and the assisted land must remain dedicated to public outdoor recreation in perpetuity.

Florida Forever & Florida Communities Trust (FCT): Florida Forever is the state's blueprint for conserving natural resources and providing urban open space. Through the FCT's Parks and Open Space grant program, funds are available to help communities acquire land for conservation and recreation. If the MPCA wishes to revert the fairways to a natural floodplain or ecological greenway, state funds could potentially purchase those specific tracts to serve as a permanent public park.

3. Form a Community Conservancy Foundation: The community could establish a non-profit foundation to manage and maintain the new "forever wild" assets.

One Florida Success Story: When the 18-hole Wildflower Golf Club in Englewood was failing, the local Lemon Bay Conservancy stepped in to buy the 80-acre course. The non-profit raised \$750,000 in private donations to purchase the course, clear it of invasive species, and successfully convert it into a nature preserve and environmental center. MPCA could riff off of this model, and the many others now on the books, establishing the **"Magnolia Point Conservancy"** to solicit tax-deductible contributions for the purchase and upkeep of the nature trails and wildlife habitats.

4. Host Community "Charrettes" to Finalize the Master Plan: When a golf course is redeveloped, home values can be challenged if the process triggers legal battles over deed restrictions, but collaborative repurposing into green space is highly sustainable. To ensure the 970 homeowners support this transition, MPCA should host what are known as "Charrettes", intensive public planning sessions where stakeholders and designers collaborate on a visual map of the property.

Through these Charrettes, the community can decide exactly which fairways will be reverted to "forever wild" conservation easements, which centralized practice greens will become community gardens, and which facilities will be submitted for LWCF public recreation grants.

Continued



A New Vision. Or, Do We Have Any Choice?

Yes, it is, And no, we don't.

MPCA currently contributes \$450,000 every year to the club, so we're starting with the pump already primed with that cash flow. Our beautiful community is built around a golf course designed by Mark McCumber in 1986, which was a while ago, but not that long in 'golf course years'. However, the greens have never been rebuilt, and the fairways, cart paths, and irrigation systems are all in desperate need of overhaul or update. There's a cool several million right there.

Across the country, an historic trend is underway at master-planned communities just like ours. Faced with shifting demographics and a decline in traditional golf participation, many residential communities are shutting down golf operations, if not entirely then at least with an eye to creating new, diverse amenities. Today's owners *and* buyers are increasingly looking for access to nature, hiking, biking, and multi-generational recreation. By stepping back from the massive financial burden of maintaining a golf course, fighting to keep pace in a competitive regional marketplace, we can transform Magnolia Point into a world-class community oasis with a focus on responsible land use and habitat preservation. Here is a proposal for how we can manage this purchase, repurpose our landscape, and fund the transition using state and federal conservation programs.

Reimagining Our Landscape: Trails, Gardens, and Nature

If we discontinue the golf operations, we instantly gain hundreds of acres of fertile, irrigated land. Because our course was designed with no parallel fairways, it naturally winds through our neighborhoods rather than sitting in a massive grid. This unique layout presents incredible opportunities:

- 1. 'Forever Wild' or 'Nature Preserve' Thinking** - Instead of spending many tens of thousands of dollars regularly fertilizing and mowing the 'rough', for instance, we can allow the most ecologically sensitive areas of the course, especially the wetlands and marsh hazards to revert to a "forever wild" state. Restoring wetlands diversifies wildlife habitats, treats stormwater, and provides beautiful interpretive learning opportunities for our families.
- 2. A Network of Walking and Biking Trails** - Our existing miles of paved golf cart paths are absolutely perfect for conversion into linear parks and open space. These paths can become a safe, scenic destination for walking, jogging, and biking in a natural setting, seamlessly connecting our 970 homes. We can also add pedestrian and bicycle bridges over the existing lakes and water features. You couldn't design, or fund, this layout for a modern residential neighborhood even if you tried.
- 3. Community Gardens and Recreation** - We can repurpose our central practice facilities, such as the driving range and chipping areas, into community farms and gardens. This would offer all residents the opportunity to connect, socialize, and grow healthy food locally. (A half-mile beyond the Medinah gate, Saratoga Springs has already sunk most of \$75 MILLION into the concept, the Saratoga Springs 'Agrihood', their 9th in the US, *and have yet to pour a single foundation.*) Furthermore, we can keep and expand our current "Activity Zone," which already features a Pickleball court, sand volleyball, and a playground. These spaces, alongside our Junior Olympic-sized pool and splash pad, provide the multi-generational recreation that modern homeowners desire.

Funding the Vision: Grants and Set-Asides

You're asking, "How do we afford to buy the land and build these new amenities without raising our dues?" The good news is that by transitioning from a private golf course to a protected environmental and recreational space, we unlock access to millions of dollars in government grants and conservation programs.

Continued



The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF): A highly competitive but rewarding federal program administered by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. This program provides 50/50 matching grants of up to \$1.5 million for acquiring land, and up to \$1.5 million for developing outdoor public recreation facilities. However, the catch: only local governmental entities are eligible to apply. To access these funds, MPCA would need to establish a formal partnership with Green Cove Springs or Clay County. In exchange for the funding, the assisted park land must be dedicated in perpetuity as a public outdoor recreation area.

Florida Forever and the **Florida Communities Trust** **Florida Forever** is the state's massive blueprint for conserving natural resources and providing urban open space. Through this initiative, the Florida Communities Trust (FCT) provides "Parks and Open Space" grants specifically designed to help communities protect natural resources and provide recreational opportunities. Since 1989, the FCT has helped acquire over 96,000 acres of land for conservation and local recreation, making it an ideal program to help us offset the purchase price of the club as 'greenspace'.

Conservation Easements: We can legally place a conservation easement over the undeveloped and "forever wild" portions of the property, permanently restricting future development. Placing lands in a conservation easement can offer significant tax benefits and potential direct compensation that reduces our financial burden. Creating a Magnolia Point Conservancy Instead of the MPCA bearing the financial load alone, we can establish a community foundation to manage and maintain these new natural assets. This has been done successfully right here in Florida! In 2006, the Wildflower Golf Club in Englewood was failing and facing a sale to developers. The local Lemon Bay Conservancy stepped in, raising \$750,000 in private, tax-deductible donations in just 15 months to purchase the 80-acre course. They successfully cleared the land of invasive species and transformed the golf course into a beautiful, thriving nature preserve. We can replicate this exact model.

Tell Me Again: What Happens to the Pub and Tennis Courts?

Discontinuing golf doesn't mean we have to lose everything. The tennis club currently operates 7 Har-Tru clay courts and a robust program of clinics and competitive leagues. The MPCA could maintain a smaller, dedicated footprint for tennis operations. Similarly, The Pub and the Crystal Dining Room could be retained as a community gathering space, or the restaurant spaces leased to an independent operator to remove the operational risk from our HOA budget while still providing food and beverage service to the dining areas indoors and out.

Tactics

Presented here as four separate 'plans', each of which can be pursued by committees or ad hoc groups of volunteers, or combined as resources and time permits. Refer to the previous sections for specifics.

Plan 1 - Leveraging "Imminent Danger" for Florida Forever Grants: The explosive development surrounding Green Cove Springs perfectly aligns with the exact priority criteria for the state's Florida Forever land acquisition program.

The Practical Play: When applying for Florida Forever funds, the MPCA can directly point to the 8,000 newly approved homes and the First Coast Expressway to secure higher priority. The program explicitly prioritizes projects where a significant portion of the land is "in imminent danger of development, in imminent danger of losing its significant natural attributes or recreational open space, or in imminent danger of subdivision".

The Financial Benefit: Florida Forever is designed to fund land acquisition to protect ecological greenways and "increase the amount of open space available in urban areas". By framing Magnolia Point as an urgent urban conservation target, the MPCA could receive state funds to directly pay for the acquisition of the golf course greenspace.

Continued



Plan 2 - Monetizing the Ponds as a Regional Water Asset: Our 38 ponds function as a massive Surface Water Management System (SWMS), an infrastructure system that collects, stores, and treats stormwater to prevent flooding and water pollution. And, we'd be well-advised to get ahead of mandatory BMAP (Basin Management Action Plan) changes on the horizon in Florida, which managing this incredible asset as a designated conservation resource will greatly help.

The Practical Play: Because the MPCA already maintains this system and works with SJRWMD, the community can position the purchase of the club as a critical watershed protection project. Florida Forever actively seeks to fund projects that "protect, restore, and maintain the quality and natural functions of land, water, and wetland systems".

The Financial Benefit: By proving that preserving this land will "contribute to the solution of water resource problems on a regional basis" and "mitigate the effects of natural disasters and floods in developed areas", the MPCA highly increases its eligibility for state acquisition funding.

Plan 3 - Establishing a Conservation Easement for Tax Deductions or Capital - We can legally separate the development rights from the land ownership by placing a conservation easement on the ponds, the marsh hazards, and the course's wildlife habitats.

The Practical Play: The MPCA can partner with a 501(c)(3) non-profit land trust, such as the North Florida Land Trust, to hold and enforce the easement in perpetuity. The recent 11th Circuit Court of Appeals decision (Champions Retreat Golf Founders, LLC v. Commissioner) specifically affirmed that golf courses are eligible for charitable deductions as long as the easement protects a "relatively natural habitat of fish, wildlife, or plants". Magnolia Point's abundant wild turkeys, deer, alligators, and bald eagles clearly satisfy this requirement.

The Financial Benefit: Placing the land under a conservation easement can provide significant charitable tax deductions or direct compensation, which can be leveraged to offset the initial purchase price or the ongoing \$450,000 yearly operational costs.

Plan 4 - Utilizing the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF): With tens of thousands of new residents moving into the immediate area, the need for public outdoor recreation will skyrocket.

The Practical Play: The MPCA can partner with the local municipality or county government to submit an application for the LWCF. The grant requires that the assisted parkland be dedicated as a public outdoor recreation area in perpetuity.

The Financial Benefit: The LWCF provides competitive 50/50 matching grants of up to \$1.5 million for land acquisition, plus up to \$1.5 million more for developing outdoor rec facilities. This could inject up to \$3 million in matched federal funds to help the community buy the land, convert the cart paths into public trails, or upgrade the existing pool and tennis facilities.

Can We Do This?

This is a diverse community, and the concepts presented here are in no way meant to reflect all our wants and needs. One size does not fit all! We can and must consider a *hybrid* of potential solutions, in which golf, if not removed from the community dance card, is *modified* in some other ways to blend with where the marketplace and new demographics are taking us. *But we need that ball rolling! Today!*

We have a rare chance to take an aging, expensive liability and turn it into a sustainable, vibrant, and genuinely beautiful asset. And there is something else worth naming plainly: buying the club means ownership. Every homeowner's stake in Magnolia Point would grow to include a tangible share of these 1,000 acres, open space and amenities that convey with your deed when you sell, and that pass to your heirs when you don't. That is not a membership fee or an annual assessment. It is property. Let's build a Magnolia Point that our children and grandchildren will not just enjoy, but own.

DAVE PETRAGLIA, EDITOR
davepetraglia@gmail.com

