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Course owner's dream a nightmare to some

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Trinitas is the most spectacular golf course open to the public while operating in defiance of county government and zoning regulations you'll ever play.

Built on 280 acres of what was part cattle ranch and part olive orchard in Calaveras County, about 20 miles east of Stockton, Trinitas has the potential to become a first-class golf resort. It has a dozen memorable holes, uniquely shaped and contoured greens that would challenge the world's best putters, a get-lost-in-nature setting and plans for a 30-room lodge and spa.

Or the course could start melting back into the countryside any day depending on how the surrounding politics, litigation and economics play out.

Which adds to the mystique and urgency for golfers.

"The movie is being written right now," says Mike Nemeo, 39. "I just don't know how it's going to end."

Trinitas is the product of Nemeo's vision. The Stockton native and his wife, Michelle, bought 440 acres near the town of Wallace in 2001. Nemeo, a partner in a commercial carpet cleaning company, says the intention was to get his family further into the country and operate an olive orchard.

The property was and is zoned as agricultural preserve.

Opponents claim Nemeo's plan from the beginning was to get the course built, then dare anyone to make the decision to let it grow over or tear it out.

The 6-handicapper at nearby Lockeford Springs (he's a 14 at Trinitas, where the slope from the back tees is an astronomical 149, he says) had shown a propensity for homemade golf. He built a hole with a 3,300 square-foot putting green and six bunkers on his five-acre parcel in Stockton.

The first protest about Trinitas construction came in 2001. Nemeo claims he didn't do any grading until 2003, and then only to build a few holes for family fun to coincide with the installation of an irrigation system for the olive trees.

"It's improbable to us the notion that he ever intended to just build a few holes for the family's personal use," says Kathy Mayhew, who lives a half-mile from Trinitas. Mayhew is the leader of "Keep it Rural Calaveras," a group formed to oppose the golf course.

"He's been quoted as saying that as soon as he saw the land, he saw it as a vision of a championship course."

The idea to build a full-fledged destination resort came early in 2005, Nemeo says. He forged ahead because he says his proposal had the support of every Calaveras County department head and its supervisors.

A former county official – former Chief Building Official Ray Waller – says he was present during a meeting of county department heads in January 2005 in which Nemeo received the go-ahead.

"We were asked if there was anything in the county code that prohibited it," Waller recalled. "When no one said anything, department heads were instructed to work with Nemeo, to help him get through the application process.

"He had his marching orders and he followed them. Everybody in the county from the top down knew this was taking place. Some people at that meeting then seemed to have memory loss."

Nemeo shortly after received a \$2.5 million construction loan based on what the then-head of the county's planning and building departments told the bank, he says. He estimates he has spent a total of \$7 million over the past seven years, much of it from loans from private sources.

"If they didn't go to the bank and tell them that everything was OK, I would still be pasture golfing," Nemeo says.

His relationship with neighbors, who were determined to keep the area rural, and county government soured as the pace of construction increased. Opponents pronounce the course Trin-NEE-tas instead of the intended TRIN-a-tas to tweak him.

The course was completed in April 2007.

Claims of faulty permit applications not detailing the scope of the project were levied. Laws and codes continued to be ignored, protesters say. Nemeo had plenty of supporters in favor of the jobs and tax revenue Trinitas could generate. But support from county supervisors waned.

Environmental impact reports showed the course to have major negative impact and that it would lead to premature urbanization of the area, Mayhew said.

"The potential economic benefits were not sufficient to negate the environmental impact," she said.

Trinitas was open only to family, friends and members for a year after its opening. In 2008, access to the course was widened and redefined as agritourism. In other words, take a tour of the orchard, buy a bottle of olive oil for \$100 and, by the way, feel free to play the golf

course.

The controversy came to a head in May 2009 when the supervisors voted 3-2 against rezoning the land for recreational use. The county ordered all golfing operations to cease.

Nemee's response? He sued the county regarding its interpretation of the code for agritourism and environmental studies. And he started aggressively marketing Trinitas, for the first time, as a golf course open to the public.

Nemee filed Chapter 11 bankruptcy in October to keep the property, on which most of the course is built, from being auctioned.

"In the meantime, we're golfing our (butts) off," he said. "Financially, we cannot afford to sit on the sideline any longer."

What does the future hold for Trinitas? George White, the planning department director for Calaveras County, and James Jones, county counsel, declined to comment, citing pending litigation scheduled to reach the courts in March.

Nemee isn't giving up his dream, one that includes a giant video scoreboard behind the 18th green. It would give Trinitas players the same final-hole treatment the pros get with larger-than-life pictures and that day's score.

In the meantime, that movie continues to write itself.

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