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Missouri City's HB 3232 awaiting Perry's signature

By Barbara Fulenwider

Missouri City Mayor Allen Owen is back home after a trip to Austin on Friday to deliver 1,600 letters to Gov. Rick Perry urging him to sign House Bill 3232.



Rick Perry

Of the total letters delivered, Owen said 1,000 were from Missouri City residents and "they are still coming." Why the governor's signature on HB 3232 is important to Missouri City is it would allow residents of subdivisions, such as Quail Valley, to have a process and voice in the replatting and rezoning of golf courses that are an integral part of their neighborhood before the land could be zoned for other uses.

Missouri City pushed for the House bill, which was sponsored by Kyle Janek in the Texas Senate and Dora Olivo in the Texas House. Others in the House who co-sponsored HB 3232 are Charlie Howard, Sylvester Turner, John Davis, John Zerwas and Wayne Smith. Missouri City has zoning and a process for citizens to voice their concerns about proposed changes but having hearings in the affected neighborhoods may help protect the rights of residents who moved there specifically for the amenities, which for Quail Valley residents is the golf course, Owen said.

Subdivision golf courses are considered to be pluses in neighborhoods.

Typically, homes line the fairways and the course and homes are developed under a single plan. Home buyers pay a premium to live in a golf course community, so buyers have an expectation that the golf course will always remain a golf course.

The problem is some subdivision golf course owners have lost money and converted the land into tracts for homes, apartments, office buildings and warehouses. Owen said, "We consider this type of redevelopment, even when it is publicly announced, to have a detrimental effect on the homeowners along with their property values and those of the entire subdivisions as well as adjacent neighborhoods." When property values deteriorate, the homeowner not only loses but so does the city the subdivision is in.

Missouri City pays for the services it provides residents with sales taxes and property taxes.

"What we've tried to convince legislators of is the people who are doing this (buying and selling golf courses in subdivisions) aren't developers.

They are land grabbers. This isn't a big Houston area developer who is coming in and buying these. They are out of state investors who see an opportunity to convert a golf course into a multi-million transaction," Owen said. "I'm not against people making money. What I am against is people making money at somebody else's expense."

As for Perry signing the bill, Owen said there's not been a single opposing vote on this bill in the House or Senate. "I came back from Austin very optimistic that he will sign it. He has three options: he can veto it, sign it or let it lay on his desk and it will become law because both the House and Senate approved it. I want him to sign it and he has until June 17 to do that."

Owen also said he's not had "a single developer tell me they are opposed to this bill." The mayor said Mark Voltmann, president of Renaissance Golf Group LLC of Dublin, Ohio, and owner of Quail Valley Country Club, "hired a lobbyist who tried to tell legislators that all

developers and builders throughout Texas and the country oppose this bill. I've asked Larry Johnson (developer of Sienna Plantation) about this bill and he said 'a reputable developer wouldn't have a problem with it and I don't.' Again, Renaissance isn't a developer."

The developer of Quail Valley and the country club is James MacNaughton, who still lives in Quail Valley. Owen said he "never had any intention of selling this golf course for any use other than what it was built for. It changes hands and all of a sudden, it's a pyramid. Suddenly you have somebody who has paid more for a country club than it's really worth and wants residents to bail them out and that's where I have a problem. What Renaissance and probably Voltmann didn't give a whole lot of thought to is Missouri City is zoned. He probably felt like he could sell city council on rezoning it and he threatened us by telling residents he'd just close it and let it grow up in weeds and at some point residents would beg us to let them rezone it," the mayor said.

"What people don't understand is if that club shuts down and property values continue to deteriorate and the city's revenue stream dips too much, I can't provide the level of services residents are accustomed to, so all the surrounding property values will suffer too," Owen said.

Another Fort Bend County news outlet reported that Voltmann said he plans to close all but one 18-hole golf course at the club but when Voltmann was reached by phone he said, "No comment," and hung up. Missouri City City Manager Frank Simpson said Voltmann has threatened that several times before.

The mayor said Voltmann has sold lifetime memberships in the club for the past three years and that one sold two years ago cost \$30,000. "How do you sell a \$30,000 lifetime membership in a club that has all these amenities and then shut them down?"

In the spring city council hired consultants to evaluate the city's buying Quail Valley Country Club for a public golf course. The consultants' preliminary report is expected in two or three weeks. Owen said the club's losses that Voltmann has talked about can't be verified. "No one has ever seen the financials regarding this club. I don't really know if he's losing money or not. He promised people that if they'd let him sell the tennis center he'd take that money and put it back in the club but there's no evidence he did. Now the tennis club is foreclosed on and the city will have to deal with that."

The mayor also said, "I'd be surprised when we get the numbers back (in the study) if the appraised value on that club won't be much more than \$5.5 million and that's at the top end." He also said, "There is an opportunity for the Quail Valley Fund (homeowner's association) to participate with the city in this. There's nothing that would prevent the city from partnering with the fund and them buying the executive nine and par 3 courses as amenities for the residents of Quail Valley only.

"If the city ends up with the golf course it's no longer private, there's no longer an initiation fee. We're going to be looking at park grants to help us preserve it. We want to be able to do it and it not have a negative impact on the city. The goal is to try to do this without raising taxes. We're going into it looking at it as an opportunity for the city to take advantage of an amenity that's economical. We'll put together an advisory group from all areas of the city to go over the results of the study and see how we can do this."

And, yes, eminent domain "is a possibility," Owen said. "It isn't chasing away anybody else, it's a fact. Clear Lake is using eminent domain to take the golf course down there," which is also owned by Renaissance. "There are lawsuits over it right now. We didn't go into this study we've having done with eminent domain as our original purpose. It is an alternative possibility. We're doing the study and going to look to see if it's feasible for the city to acquire the club to save it for all the residents of Missouri City."

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