

Golf Extra

Bandon Dunes' new course plan is dogged by competing visions

Course owners try to negotiate a land swap at Bandon State Natural Area

Sherri Laier, a state parks natural resources specialist, and Ben Fisher, a manager, check out a wetlands at Bandon State Natural Area. Bandon Dunes owner Mike Keiser wants to build a golf course over a portion of the area and is proposing a land swap. (Mike Stahlberg/The Register-Guard)

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For The Register-Guard

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BANDON — As she hikes through the Bandon State Natural Area a few miles south of Bandon on the Oregon Coast, Sherri Laier sees things that most others miss. The pawprints of a critter. A colorful tree frog. A tiny young plant, poking through the ground. Different types of lichen. Mushrooms.

The area's natural resources specialist for the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, Laier can tell you about the three kinds of hummingbirds found here, in a bird-watcher's paradise. She talks excitedly about the unexpected discovery of the eggs of the Western pond turtle, and about a pair of Black-crowned Night Herons found during nesting season in a previously obscured wetlands that were uncovered when gorse, the highly invasive non-native plant with the vibrant yellow flowers and the devastating environmental impact, was abated in a state parks program to restore the area to its native state.

Emerging from a forest, Laier leads you between massive sand dunes and into open spaces dotted with beach grass, the dune-sides thick with shore pines, madrone and manzanita.

From beyond the looming dunes, you can hear the Pacific Ocean.

In this setting Laier sees “a magnificent example of dunal systems. As you know, the coast has been developed from California to Washington, and so to find an undeveloped piece of dunes is very, very rare.

“This state natural area designation is considered the highest designation we can give a state park. It means we don’t put any facilities on it, we don’t even put trails, necessarily. We leave it natural.”

And yet Mike Keiser has also tramped through these dunes, and he imagines a different vista:

Magnificent golf holes, the fairways framed by the dunes, or rising over them and above the beach, with riveting views of the ocean.

It is here that Keiser, whose seemingly limitless vision and money built Bandon Dunes Golf Resort north of Bandon — four world-famous regulation golf courses, plus a 13-hole par-3 course — has dreamed up another remarkable project.

His plan: To construct what’s tentatively been called Bandon Muni Golf Links, a 27-hole complex that will be designed by Gil Hanse, the latest big thing in golf course architecture, currently designing the course that will host the golf competition in the 2016 Summer Olympics in Brazil.

Hanse already has penciled out a very tentative routing for three sets of nine holes, each of the elite quality of the Bandon Dunes courses. During the high season of the summer and fall, when golfers pay as much as \$280 for a round at Bandon Dunes, Pacific Dunes, Bandon Trails and Old Macdonald, they’d take the 15- to 20-minute van ride south and pay that much to play 18 holes at Bandon Muni.

But here’s the twist, and the reason that the proposed golf complex has been dubbed the “Muni,” even though it will be privately owned:

The new facility would be inspired by St. Andrews in Scotland, where locals play the iconic course for a modest sum.

At Bandon Muni, Oregonians would pay half the going rate and, more to the point, Coos and Curry County residents would pay a pittance, perhaps \$25 or as little as \$10, to play 18 holes. Junior golfers would play free. And the Muni would host a junior caddie program, with lodging, so that young caddies could get enough time looping during summers that they’d qualify for Evans Scholarships to pay for their college education.

Over the years, Keiser has acquired enough land adjacent to the east side of the Bandon State Natural Area to build an 18-hole course. But to create golf holes that are truly

spectacular, through the dunes and with views of the ocean, he's seeking land within the protected boundaries.

And so Keiser has proposed a deal, a trade in which the state would receive land in return and a considerable amount of cash.

As befits the game of golf, the land swap has proved to be anything but simple, requiring diligent work, continued tweaking and, most of all, years of patience.

Anatomy of a deal

In 2010, Keiser's company, Bandon Biota, proposed to the state a land swap, in which Keiser would obtain 210 acres of upland on the east side of the southern end of Bandon State Natural Area — an 880-acre expanse that is part of the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department's state park system — in exchange for two pieces of land that Keiser owns: About 97 riverfront acres that would be added to Bullards Beach State Park on the Coquille River, and 111 acres of oceanfront land at the south end of Bandon State Natural Area.

According to the Keiser proposal, “the reconfiguration will pare off a small slice of inaccessible southeasterly BSNA upland that is almost entirely covered with gorse and other invasive plant species.” According to joint appraisals of the properties in July 2010, the land that Keiser would receive was valued at \$910,000; the land the state would receive was valued at just over \$1 million.

However, the Oregon State Parks and Recreation Commission has set a high standard before land is allowed to leave the state parks system.

“This is not something that can be done lightly, because (when) properties leave the state park system, you generally don't get to go back and do it over again if it doesn't work out,” state parks spokesman Chris Havel said. “And so there has to be an ‘overwhelming public benefit’ ” to such a transaction.

In the Bandon Dunes view, the acreage Keiser is seeking for Bandon Muni is a gorse-choked piece of land that is without trails, virtually impassable and getting little public use. Hence a golf course makes sense, economically and otherwise.

However, Laier and Ben Fisher, state parks manager for the natural area, point out that by definition a state natural area is intended to be an area of light use — in fact, they can't tell you how many people do use it — with few, if any, trails, and no public facilities.

A golf course there “would be devastating to the natural area,” Laier said. “If we're talking about something through here, this is where all the value is of the dunal system.”

Since the original 2010 proposal, the boundaries of the proposed swap have apparently been adjusted and Keiser has added an undisclosed amount of money to the offering,

though the precise details of the land-swap proposal as they stand now are not known as negotiations continue between Bandon Dunes and the parks department.

“It was originally two-to-one, and now it’s gone to four-to-one, to the benefit of the state, including land swaps and cash considerations,” said Bandon Dunes representative B.R. Koehnemann.

Clearly, though, Keiser has yet to put forth a deal that the state parks staff is willing to put into writing for a public hearing, which would be held in Bandon, before the proposal would be forwarded to the state parks commission for another public hearing and a vote.

There are complex issues at play here. That area of beach land — including the southerly addition that Keiser is offering to the state natural area — is designated as habitat restoration area for the Snowy Plover, an endangered shorebird. (In fact, Keiser’s original proposal excludes the protected beach land “along and above the ocean shore.”) And the acreage in the natural area was, years ago, obtained by the state parks system from the federal Bureau of Land Management, with the caveat that it remain in its natural state, meaning that the BLM would have to agree to any deal to build a golf course.

Opposition likely

In July 2011, a parks commission meeting in Bandon drew strong support for the project from a tourism and economic development standpoint; Koehnemann estimates that Bandon Muni would create 40 to 50 full-time jobs.

But in what Keiser once called “a glacially political landscape,” there figures to be opposition, too, from those seeking to preserve the coastline in its natural state.

“In general, state parks has a requirement that any land exchange be exceedingly beneficial to the people of the state,” said Cameron La Follette, land use director for the nonprofit Oregon Coast Alliance.

“None of the proposals that Bandon Dunes has put forward publicly so far have met that criteria, in our opinion and clearly in the state’s opinion as well. It’s a very high bar to cross. That’s especially true in general in respect to the coast, because the coast is a very scenic place. ...

“The removal of any land from the state parks system, especially on the coast, in exchange for something else should be subject to a very intense scrutiny. There are so many acres on the coast, and not one acre more.”

La Follette also wonders whether Bandon needs another golf course.

“We have been concerned about the way things are developing in Bandon,” she said. “There are already several golf courses. The opportunity for a wilder, quieter recreation needs to not get squeezed out of the picture.”

Impact on Crossings?

As the crow flies, the proposed Bandon Muni would be virtually across the street from Bandon Crossings, the 18-hole golf course principally owned by Carla Smith of Eugene, who built the course with her husband, Rex.

Designed by Dan Hixson, Bandon Crossings is a scenic, high-quality regulation 18-hole course that meanders through old farm land and hills on the east side of Highway 101. When the course opened, almost six years ago, Carla Smith envisioned it drawing golfers from the Bandon Dunes resort, figuring they'd welcome a lower-priced alternative as well as the opportunity to ride in a cart after hoofing it at walking-only Bandon Dunes.

That business model hasn't become reality.

"Ninety-nine percent of the people who play (at Bandon Dunes) don't have a clue that we're there," Smith said. "And their rounds are already paid for, or they're budgeted ahead of time, and they don't care how much it costs."

If the main entrance to the proposed Bandon Muni turned out to be across from Bandon Crossings — and it might — "that would be lovely," Smith said. "I love the idea that they would be getting some of these people off the resort and around in the community."

On the other hand, Bandon Crossings has repositioned itself as a locals course, and Bandon Muni, with its "St. Andrews model," would certainly siphon some Coos and Curry County players with lower greens fees.

"He (Keiser) is essentially competing with me then, undercutting my price, which he can afford to do," Smith said.

Smith, who has never met Keiser, said she admires him greatly.

"Mike Keiser beat the odds because he's a man of vision," she said. "He's not building this golf course because he wants to make more money, he's building it because he likes golf courses. ..."

"I'm not going to be negative about it. My crystal ball isn't working and I don't know what the outcome will be if it's built. I don't think Mike Keiser is going to do anything that is extremely negative to the environment. I think that they are good stewards of the land. But I'm not saying that I'm in favor of it or not in favor of it. I'm trying to remain neutral on the whole issue."

The Muni's future

After three years in which the Bandon Muni proposal has been public, and at least that many in which it percolated behind the scenes, it's hard to tell how far along it is. Still on

the front nine? Or nearing the final holes, and the next stage, which would be a tentative agreement placed before the public for discussion?

“There is no time line,” said Koehnemann, the Bandon Dunes representative. “There is no expectation of ‘we think it will get done in the next four-to-six months.’ ...

“I can’t speak for why it’s taken this long, but it sounds like the negotiation points just haven’t been right. We’ve been patient through this, it’s never been rushed, we’ve never given them a deadline.”

Koehnemann said Bandon Dunes has been very open about its goals.

“I think Mr. Keiser has been very forthright as to what this is going to be,” he said. “And we really see it as a public amenity.

“If Bandon Muni doesn’t happen, it doesn’t happen. We’d like to see it happen, because it would be a positive thing for the local area and the economy, and a positive thing for the national golf scene. And as a golfer I’d like to see it happen. But if it doesn’t happen there are other projects that we’re always working on, too.”

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Chris Havel

Oregon State Parks spokesman

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