

**Robert Creek Landing Golf Course:
Rehabilitation & Reinvestment in Ridgely, Tennessee**

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Capstone Project

Tennessee Certified Economic Developer Program

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Ridgeton, Tennessee clearly had the potential to become a ‘river resort community.’ The City was perched on the bluffs overlooking the Tennessee River, a landmark and lifestyle influence that was shared by many residents and visitors. Residents would discuss river resort funding in advocating for projects and elected officials consistently advocated the need to become a river resort community. Colleagues in other jurisdictions would always note the community’s tremendous potential because of its proximity to the Tennessee River. Unfortunately, the definition of a river resort community was never clearly understood by the leadership and residents of Ridgeton. The Board of Commissioners never adopted a vision for what being a river resort community might mean to Ridgeton. There was no foresight to plan significant capital projects, while business development and other investment in the town was stagnant. Capturing the area’s potential and inspiring the right people to act on Ridgeton’s potential was key to rehabilitating and reviving the region’s economy.

The initial explorations of whether or not to redevelop the golf course took place in early 2014, in conjunction with the City Manager’s initial Tennessee Certified Economic Developer courses. The Robert Creek Landing Golf Course in Ridgeton was an economic driver and regional tourist draw while it was operational, featuring excellent and challenging conditions, and was recognized annually by publications as a beautiful and challenging course. *Golfweek Magazine* named the course among the “Best Course You Can Play,” from 2002 through 2010.¹ Starting in 2012, however, the golf course was closed due a change in ownership and declining attendance brought on by lack of marketing and an economic recession. It was in the community’s best interest to use the

¹ "Best Courses You Can Play." *Golfweek Magazine*, March 11, 2010.

City as a catalyst to reopen the golf course and encourage capital investment in the facility. With a new flow of visitors to the course, Ridgeton could have seen a boost in interest for its other amenities and an improvement in local economic activity. The reopening of and reinvestment in the Robert Creek Landing Golf Course, would bring Ridgeton one step closer to realizing its goal of becoming a ‘river resort community.’

Background

Ridgeton is a scenic and historic Tennessee River community of 2,667. Originally incorporated in 1840, the Ridgeton area is accessible to large metropolitan areas via road, air and river – as it is located near major highways (State Route 114 and State Route 128), is home to a municipal airport adjacent to the golf course, and has a full-service marina on the river. The City is two hours from both the metropolitan statistical areas of Memphis and Nashville, as well as a ninety-minute drive from Florence, Alabama. The area is rich in local history, serving as both the backdrop for an old iron furnace and several Civil War sites. The City is also home to Tennessee’s only Pulitzer Prize winning author, T.S. Stripling, and maintains an interpretive - house museum.

The Hassell Foundation, a local non-profit chartered to support area recreation and education projects, initially conceived the idea of opening the Robert Creek Landing Golf Club. The course was launched in fall 2001 in conjunction with the State of Tennessee’s ‘Bear Trace Golf Trail’, and was designed by famed golfer and course architect Jack Nicklaus. Initially, the State of Tennessee owned the facilities and the non-profit managed all day-to-day operations. The course was well maintained, but marketing initiatives were not pursued and a development of overnight lodging was not completed.

As a result, the course began to run a \$250,000² annual deficit and in 2008, it was sold to local businessman Frank Gaines.

In researching the benefits and drawbacks of reopening a golf course as an economic development strategy, the City discovered some unfavorable conditions within the sport that could impact the success of a revitalized course. Golf has experienced waning popularity across the United States in recent years. The sport does not enjoy the same star power it did in the 1990's, stymied by the recession and a decline in the population and purchasing power of Baby Boomers. Several experts report that the country has become oversaturated with courses over the past two decades.³ The City consulted with local officials that operate municipal golf courses (particularly the City Managers of Sevierville and Springfield, Tennessee), and both stated difficulties with high upkeep costs, inadequate production of revenue, and underuse by residents in their respective communities.

Despite the drawbacks, the location of Ridgeton's course, a unique partnership with the local state prison and the benefits of targeted marketing strategies presented a promising opportunity for the project. In addition, the national economy began to turn around in 2013, state revenues were on the rise, and the City had a political will to improve its downtown and riverfront areas. The municipal airport immediately adjacent to the golf course had received federal funding to rehabilitate its runway, making it more accessible and attractive to a range of aircraft used by corporations and individuals that previously patronized the course.

² Singer, R. (2014). *Acquisition Feasibility Review: Robert Creek Landing Golf Course*. Jupiter, Florida: National Golf Foundation Consulting. Pg.1

³ Ibid., Pg. 25.

Furthermore, William County and the City of Ridgeton were designated as a special Tennessee River Resort Area by the state legislature and received a special portion of sales tax to support tourism development and public recreation activities. With both positive and negative indicators present, the City sought a more in-depth analysis of the project's potential and entered into a professional services agreement with the National Golf Foundation to conduct a feasibility study. The goal of the study was to analyze the risk associated with acquiring Robert Creek Landing, assess market share and revenues for the course, and provide recommendations for the operations and capital investment involved with re-opening the course.

According to the findings of the feasibility study, three levels of courses exist (based upon green's fees); value courses, intermediary courses, and premium courses. Robert Creek Landing, because of its highly acclaimed facilities and course difficulty, would easily be classified as a premium course; with recommended fees of at least \$80 per golfer during peak season. The study suggested that local golfers may not be able to afford the fees and would not constitute a majority of the number of rounds played, but households residing within one hundred miles of Ridgeton were more likely than the national average to play golf regularly.⁴

Instead of focusing on the local golf market, the study suggested that the success of the course would hinge on attracting golfers from the major metropolitan areas within a two-hour radius and offering play-and-stay packages. An overnight housing development on or near the course, as well as targeted marketing initiatives by a third-party operator, would be a critical components for overcoming the shortfalls of other

⁴ Ibid. Pg. 20.

national and state courses. With no other premier courses in the area, Robert Creek Landing was in a prime position to serve as the regional destination golf course.

Project Description

Major players in the Robert Creek Landing project included: the City of Ridgeton, property owner Mr. Gaines, and a to-be-determined golf course operator. The City of Ridgeton's role in the project was to convene all parties and be a catalyst for driving the project forward. The City had the ability to offer local incentives and abatements, and fund the feasibility study and other subsequent consulting needs. It also owned the adjacent airport and could provide full-time management and coordination of the project. City Commissioners were primarily interested in the indirect revenues generated by the course, rather than direct revenues such as greens fees and restaurant sales, indicating the operator would be permitted to keep those profits. Job creation and local economic activity were the top priorities of City officials, particularly because the course, in its eleven years in operation (2001 to 2012), generated roughly \$100,000⁵ in annual indirect revenues for the municipality. This revenue included sales tax, mixed drink taxes, business license fees, and additional utility sales.

Mr. Gaines's role was to provide permanent or long-term access to the golf course. Under recommendations in the feasibility study, Mr. Gaines would benefit from abatements on all local taxes and compensation from the sale of property for overnight housing units, which would be developed by the third party and sold or rented to visiting golfers. The property owner could have been motivated to use the reinvestment project to

⁵ "Strategic Plan, 2014 – 2020: Executive Summary." *City of Ridgeton, Tennessee*, May 15, 2014. Pg. 6.

repair his reputation in the community, as he was widely blamed by area residents for the consequences of the course closure.

The third party operator of Robert Creek Landing would be determined through a selection process and have complete discretion over the operations of the course, including staff. They would also earn all direct revenues from the course and be responsible for the capital costs associated with the project. The feasibility study suggested that Robert Creek Landing could reach a sustainable number of annual rounds played and generate a surplus within two years. Charts one and two in the appendices show the projected number of rounds and course revenues.⁶

The Robert Creek Landing project essentially involved three separate, but equally important phases: acquisition, rehabilitation, and long-term capital investment. In the feasibility study, the consultants recommended the City enter into a twenty-year lease with the property owner for access to the course. The lease would ensure that the City would not be responsible for the long-term care of the property, and that the property owner could benefit from the rehabilitation and development at the course. Once a lease was executed, the City could engage the third-party operator and property owner with incentives and abatements, and work out the details for long-term capital investment.

One additional recommendation in the study was that the City could possibly coordinate with the nearby South Central Correctional Facility to provide inmate labor for basic mowing and landscaping activities, offering an operating savings for the third-party operator. Total rehabilitation costs for Robert Creek Landing were estimated at

⁶ Ibid. Pg. 6.

\$902,698.75.⁷ Long-term capital investment recommendations included building the overnight housing for play-and-stay packages, as well as a sustained, targeted marketing program for the course. The feasibility study recommended the development of up to 40 overnight housing units, and a minimum of \$50,000 annually for marketing activities to be controlled by the third-party operator.

The rehabilitation of Robert Creek Landing blended well with other projects and investments taking place in Ridgeton at the time. Between 2012 and 2015, more than \$5,000,000 of local, state, and federal funding was spent in historic downtown Ridgeton, the City's scenic riverfront, and the municipally owned airport. Additionally, the City began to work on its first strategic plan. The plan was developed over a period of ten months in conjunction with residents, stakeholders, and community groups, resulting in a five-year strategic plan that marked the City's first effort at longer term visioning. The plan offered elected officials valuable insight into the community and provided staff with a list of agreed-upon capital projects to pursue.

The golf course project was listed under the first goal (vibrant and growing community) of Vision Ridgeton 2020. In a household survey of Ridgeton residents, an overwhelming majority stated that the City should actively try to grow, develop, and expand (77%), and that they would pay more taxes for increased business and commercial development services (32%).⁸ Additionally, a focus group was formed to explore a local incentives program, as Ridgeton and William County had never offered incentives to an existing, expanding, or incoming business. No qualifying criteria were

⁷ Ibid. Appendices – 5.

⁸ "Strategic Plan, 2014 – 2020: Executive Summary." *City of Ridgeton, Tennessee*, May 15, 2014. Pg. 22-23.

ever developed and the City's Industrial Development Board had not convened for at least a decade. A re-opening of the Robert Creek Landing golf course fit in with the progress being made across Ridgeton.

Unfortunately, the many months of work put towards Robert Creek Landing never resulted in a deal. In November 2014, two new City Commissioners were elected and voted during their first meeting to terminate the City Manager's contract, three-to-two. While the new elected officials did not outwardly oppose the golf course deal, it was apparent the political winds in Ridgeton had changed direction. Both new Commissioners were elected largely due to residents being upset over construction in the community. The focus group that had gathered to discuss local incentives never met again. Mr. Gaines was briefed about the feasibility study and has since pledged to be uncooperative with any City-led efforts regarding the course. Additionally, the owner of several Main Street businesses and a prominent supporter of progress in the community was so disheartened by the changing winds that he sold his businesses and move to another jurisdiction. The opportunity for the Robert Creek Landing project still exists; however, the political will may be lacking.

Results & Lessons Learned

Between 2012 and 2015, Ridgeton was the recipient of several grants. The funding from each of the grants represents a significant investment from the federal, state, and local governments in the community that had a tangible impact on local businesses. The 2013 TN Downtowns Program grant provided training for downtown development, as well as funding for minor façade improvements and a public access dock

adjacent to Main Street. Boaters frequently used the dock to explore the downtown area and grab a bite to eat. The City used a recycling equipment grant to offer and then expand commercial recycling services. The City received several airport grants to rehabilitate the original runway and improve other airport facilities. The steady flow of grant funding into the community bolstered efforts to focus on the golf course, downtown, airport, and riverfront. Chart three in the appendices details all of the grants received by Ridgeton between 2012 and 2015.

The completion of the feasibility study provided the community with an understanding that, despite downward trends on the national level, the Robert Creek Landing golf course could become profitable with the right operator and commitment to both long and short-term capital investment. Prior to the completion of the feasibility study, neither the City, property owner, nor anyone else in the region knew the market potential of Robert Creek Landing; no one knew how many rounds of golf could be expected with an appropriate marketing budget, or how many overnight rooms or cottages would be appropriate to build. Mr. Gaines had not even expected the facility to re-open as a golf course and was using the fairways to pull hay. The feasibility study answered several pivotal questions in the effort to re-opening Robert Creek Landing.

Several learned lessons are apparent when examining the case study of this effort. First, is that big dreams are often tougher to make reality in smaller communities. For whatever reason, differences of opinion and insistence on personal agendas become magnified in smaller communities. Ridgeton, however charming and quaint, was a place where a small group of individuals, with difficult personalities and political agendas, commanded an unbalanced amount of power that prevented the project from blossoming.

Planning the project, funding the feasibility study, and putting together the pieces of the deal were all far more difficult without the help of the property owner, and in the face of an upcoming local election. It was incorrectly assumed, unfortunately, that the project would rise above the shortcomings of small town politics.

Another learned lesson was that community involvement is as important as infrastructure improvements. From a governmental standpoint, it is natural to approach a community in terms of installing gas lines, running access roads, and building sidewalks, but in order to achieve success in this project, the City needed to branch out beyond its tangible assets to meet with businesses serving specific community needs, cooperative property owners and community groups that were active and supportive. Making Ridgeton's historic Main Street a great downtown involved far more than installing red brick sidewalks and improving street lighting; hours spent in the office were often matched by patronizing a local restaurant, presenting at a Rotary Club meeting, or planning community events.

Ridgeton can take a number of 'next steps' in continuing to work towards a becoming a 'river resort community.' The most obvious are to first decide on a group vision or a policy direction for the community. The new elected officials must decide if they want the City to play an active role in local economic development. The community must decide whether to focus on tourism development, or try to attract a different type of industry. Officials should consider whether or not to reconvene the City's Industrial Development Board, and if so, determine who should be appointed to the Board and which characteristics are most important for developing a local incentives program. The City should also re-examine its five-year strategic plan to determine which elements it

will continue to support and fund. Finally, if the City and property owner ever decide to pursue a redevelopment of Robert Creek Landing, a long-term lease and a request for qualifications, or RFQ, would need to be issued to find a qualified operator.

Conclusion

Revitalizing Ridgeton and the Robert Creek Landing Golf Club involved several components of the Tennessee Certified Economic Developer curriculum, most notably items from courses in marketing, finance, strategic planning, and managing economic development organizations. Frequently, visitors to Ridgeton and patrons of the golf course would describe the area as “Tennessee’s best kept secret.” Instructors in the Marketing & Attraction course explained the importance of a smart and targeted marketing campaign.⁹ Another takeaway from the course was how public events could be used as a way of showcasing the downtown, riverfront, airport, and golf course. During the Finance course, the use of tax abatements, different types of incentives, and the use of special taxing districts were described as a means to spur development.¹⁰ Speakers at the Strategic Planning course highlighted the importance of engaging as many different perspectives as possible when developing a plan.¹¹ This proved to be an important point in developing the City of Ridgeton’s first five-year strategic plan and in forming a focus

⁹ Miller, Janet. "Economic Development Overview of Marketing & Attraction." Lecture, Tennessee Marketing & Attraction Course from Center for Industrial Services, Nashville, Tennessee, June 24-25, 2014. Pg.18.

¹⁰ Mamantov, Mark. "Understanding Development Finance." Lecture, Tennessee Economic Development Finance Course from Center for Industrial Services, Knoxville, Tennessee, February 20-21, 2014. Pg.4.

¹¹ Kolzow, David. "Strategic Planning for Tennessee Communities in the Knowledge Economy." Lecture, Tennessee Strategic Planning for Economic Development Course from Center for Industrial Services, Knoxville, Tennessee, June 15-16, 2015. Pg. 14.

group to discuss potential locally offered incentives for the golf course project. The importance of communicating planned projects and both positive and negative progress was also highlighted. During the Managing Economic Development Organizations course, organizing volunteers and properly communicating expectations were discussed.¹² This played an important role in the effort to reinvigorate and breathe new life into the City's small-town Chamber of Commerce.

Ridgeton faces tremendous challenges in the years ahead. Local revenues are flat, the jurisdiction is not located immediately near a major population center, private investment is not planned, the unemployment and vacant housing rates are above average, and several other economic indicators do not look promising. In order to improve its local economy, the City needs to participate in transformative projects that will promote capital investment. The Robert Creek Landing project does both of these things. The project makes use of an existing community asset and fits with the jurisdiction's stated goal of promoting tourism development in the area. Reopening and rehabilitating the Robert Creek Landing golf course could easily put Ridgeton on the road to realizing its potential as a 'river resort community.'

¹² Kolzow, David. "Leading & Managing the Development Organization." Lecture, Tennessee Managing Economic Development Organizations Course from Center for Industrial Services, Chattanooga, Tennessee, November 5-6, 2014. Pg. 29.

Appendix

Chart One: Rounds Played Projections

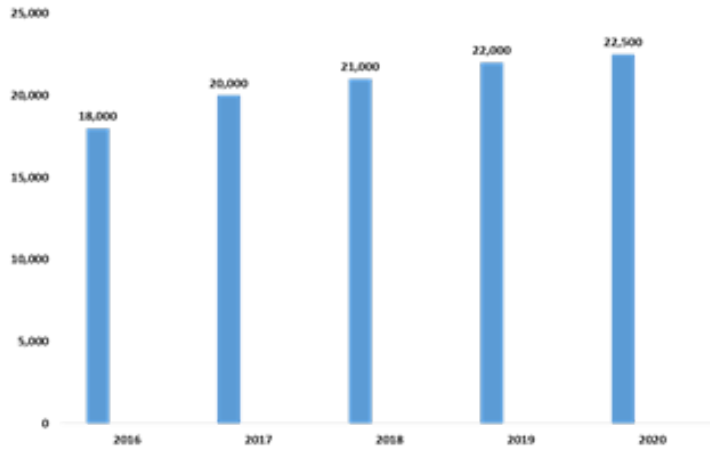


Chart Two: Revenue Projections

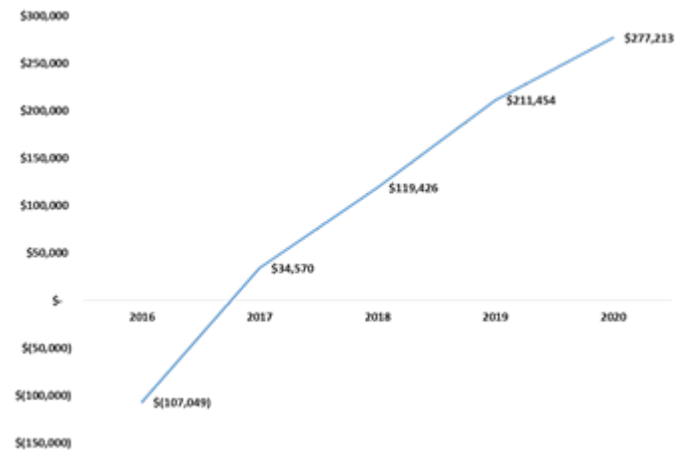


Chart Three: Grants Received, 2012-2015

Program	Benefit	Amount
TN Downtowns	Downtown training, access dock, façade improvements	\$15,000
LPRF	River Park splash pad installation	\$250,000
CDBG – Disaster, 2010	Downtown storm sewer improvements	\$500,000
CDBG	Waterline extension	\$1,000,000
CBBG	Fire truck replacement	\$350,000
TDOT Multimodal	Sidewalks linking marina, downtown, & River Park	\$1,000,000
TDOT TEP	Main Street sidewalks, landscaping, lighting, etc.	\$975,000
Recycling Equipment	Recycling bins for residential & commercial program	\$25,000
TDOT Aeronautics	Runway rehabilitation	\$1,000,000
TDOT Aeronautics	Facilities grant; terminal & hangar improvements	\$30,000

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*Please note: Jurisdiction, property, and individual names have been removed to protect privacy.