

Going and Gone: golf course stuff auctioned off

Everything at San Luis Rey Downs in Bonsall sold to highest bidders

By [J. Harry Jones \(/staff/j-harry-jones/\)](#) 5:12 p.m. Sept. 25, 2014



An auctioneer works the former dining room at the San Luis Rey Downs Golf Course resort, hoping to get a new owner for everything that used to belong to the golf club. — *John Gastaldo*

BONSALL — It looks like the San Luis Rey Downs golf course and resort — a North County institution for 52 years until it closed for business last month — is gone for good.

Inside the club's restaurant and lounge, its bay windows overlooking dying fairways, about 100 people gathered for an auction Thursday where every single piece of the aging resort was sold off at bargain prices.

Twenty-four old televisions from the shuttered hotel on the property were snatched up by one man for a total of \$17.50.

"You'd be the West Coast distributor for 1980s TV's," auctioneer Jake Cheechov told the prospective buyer, injecting some levity into the somewhat bleak scene. "Congratulations, you are the TV King of Southern California."

From tools to golf courts to chairs to bunker rakes, everything went quickly.

Lot No. 92 — out of 462 up for bid — consisted of more than 50 used golf club shafts.

"If you've ever wanted to give somebody the shaft, this is your opportunity," Cheechov joked. The items went for \$25.

Though neighbors of the golf course decried its closure and are fighting plans to turn the site into a natural wetlands, none came to pick up a piece of memorabilia.

The crowd was composed of hard-core auction veterans looking to score a great deal, said McCormack Auction Systems employee Jason Stancill.

Reminders of the course's baleful end were everywhere. A sign on the Pro Shop door read: "As of 8/7/2014 golf course is permanently closed. Please do not trespass on property."

Even the 83 chairs that the bidders were sitting on were sold in lot No. 102 for \$1,700 — though the auctioneer cautioned they couldn't be carted off until the event was over.

The Vessels family, owners of the course for decades, decided earlier this year to close the Downs, which was designed in 1961 by Billy Bell Jr. who a short time earlier had designed Torrey Pines.

The owners said the course had been steadily losing money for nearly a decade and — faced with a decline in golfers and too many competing courses in North County — there was no way they could keep it open. Instead, the ownership has embarked on a unique plan to turn the course into a wetland mitigation land bank.

Years of regulatory approvals still must be maneuvered, but if that happens then everything at the site — including the course, the hotel, the banquet room, pro shop, restaurant and tennis courts — would be razed and the entire area would be replanted.

The project could cost millions, but the potential profit is immense if it all comes together. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has gone on record saying the region is in desperate need of such mitigation banks. Developers throughout the North County — looking to offset environmental damage caused by their projects — could buy mitigation “credits” from the property. Experts say the potential value of such a bank could be in the tens of millions of dollars.

Residents in the area, and longtime golfers who love the course, oppose the plan. They say a golf course is workable. Even if golf is history, they say, they would rather see the land turned into a park instead of a land bank that would be fenced off and inaccessible to the public.

One auction worker said a couple from the neighborhood dropped by early Thursday morning to complain about everything being sold off — but the mood during the sale was all business.

Lot No. 59, which included a beat up desk and office chair and some filing cabinets, was won by one gentlemen after a brief bidding war that began at a buck.

“Sold to Donald Trump right there for four whole dollars,” Cheechov said.

The auctioneer even got one very current event into his nonstop calling. Selling off two televisions that did not come with stands, Cheechov commented: “They are holderless, like our government will soon be Holderless. I heard that this morning.” He was referring to the announcement Thursday morning that U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder will soon resign. The joke passed with virtually no reaction.

© Copyright 2014 The San Diego Union-Tribune, LLC. An MLIM LLC Company. All rights reserved.