

Golfers, environmentalists find common ground on fairway

[William Westhoven](#), May 5, 2016

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Golfers and environmentalists rarely see eye-to-eye, but for one day at Warren County course, they found common ground on the fairways of Hawke Point Golf Club.

Looking to raise funds and awareness about New Jersey's primary water supply, the Highlands Coalition hosted a unique golf outing at Hawk Pointe, where members of the nonprofit organization say the owners have taken the responsibility to design, build and maintain their 18-hole course with innovative methods to minimize the impact their business has on the environment.

"It's a real model for other courses to use," Highlands Coalition Executive Director Julia Somers said of Hawk Pointe. "Protecting habitats and being much more creative about how you develop a golf course, absolutely, is better than covering the ground with impervious cover. So it's going to be an attraction, not a negative on the landscape."

Somers oversees the Highlands Coalition from its base in Boonton, working to protect and restore natural resources in the New Jersey Highlands Region, which stretches from Hunterdon County through most of northwest New Jersey and is the source of water for about 5.4 million New Jersey residents.

Recycling and reusing water from the club and the residential component of the development through its own \$4 million wastewater treatment plant, and building a 1,900-panel solar farm on the site to power all club operations, are just two ways Hawk Pointe principal Richard Cotton, a Warren County native, says his club is respecting the land he once hunted and fished on as a child.

"When I bought the property, we had a few goals," said Cotton, who about 25 years ago transformed 400 acres of farm land off Route 31 into a mixed-use development that includes the 18-hole course, 96 single-family homes and 24 condominiums. "One was to keep 80 percent of the land as open space, two was to create local jobs. And anything that happened on the property,

environmentally, would have to stay on the property. We worked with the Highlands a lot in the concepts of the planning."

Thursday, about 25 golfers took to the course to see for themselves, in between breakfast and lunch.

"Our theme is that the golf course is a shared resource and the environment is a shared resource," said George Stafford, a Highlands Coalition program director who organized the outing. "That's what golfers and environmentalists have in common. So obey all the rules of etiquette, don't knock down any trees with your golf carts. And no cigar butts, please. That's another thing that gives golfers a bad name."

Most of the participating golfers said they were more interested in checking out the course and supporting their friends in the coalition than learning about the eco-friendly details of Cotton's enterprise.

"What impresses me is a well-managed course," said Chuck Tahaney of Livingston. "I've read a little about what they've done, so I'm interested to see how that works. If that is a benefit to the course, as a golfer, you have to appreciate that."

"Golfers maybe don't know the importance of the Highlands and the water supply in New Jersey," Somers said. "So while we have them captive, we will take the opportunity to open their eyes about what's going on."

Cotton is especially proud of the biological membrane wastewater-treatment system he brought to the course that uses technology developed by NASA.

"Some of the techniques and materials that were used for recycling water in the space program are what we use in this biological membrane plant," Cotton said. "We take the wastewater, and in 72 hours it's treated to drinking water standard, then used for watering the property."

His stewardship also affected the design of the course. Rather than pack the acreage with parallel holes, the course meanders through natural slopes, ridges and valleys Cotton did his best to preserve.

"When we started in the '90s, the average golf course moved about 1 million cubic yards of earth," he said. "We moved 100,000 yards here."

He also maintains that his course requires less digging and less nitrate fertilizer than what would typically be used in the fields for growing corn or soybean crops.

"I am fourth-generation Warren County and a founding member of the Musconetcong Watershed Association," Cotton said. "I worked with the South Branch Watershed to create the Hunterdon Heritage Land Trust. I got very involved in farmland preservation in the '80s, trying to help change what was happening in the evolution between land and agrarian communities, and

transition and suburban sprawl. I've always been on the side of resource, good planning and smart planning."

Not all environmentalists, however, agree that golf courses are a good use for land, particularly in the Highlands Region.

"I don't know all the details of the course there, but I have fought against golf courses in the highlands for too many years to be comfortable with this," said Jeff Tittel, executive director of the New Jersey Sierra Club. "Some golf courses are watered with up to half a million gallons a day, maybe 1 million when it is hot and dry. By comparison, that is about what a town like Newton uses in a day. It's like celebrating Arbor Day by cutting down a tree. I would rather take them on a hike."

"It is a problem, but that's not happening here," Somers said about Tittel's remarks.

"I would welcome Jeff to come here and we'll go through what we do, which we did with the neighbors," cotton said. "We think decentralized communities that are based around the resource have a lot greater longevity, rather than to tie into a regional sewer plant that dumps into the stream that is chemically balanced to achieve water quality. Our goal, really, was to use the Highlands smart growth state plan to create a community, not a subdivision, and everything that lived in that open space — animals, plants — are all part of that community. So this model is not only how you live and recreate, but how you manage resources, how you can deal with economics, how you can run a business and how you can be good to your community, and create opportunities, and still respect the people and things that are here."

"This is an unusual course, whose ownership and the mission behind it was to do exactly that, to marry the environment in a way that golf, frankly, was originally created to do," said Highlands Coalition Executive Director Julia Somers. "I grew up in Scotland, the home of golf. there were links courses and they didn't water the courses, and they didn't have perfectly flat greens. (Cotton) has really tried to use his landscape here to create an interesting course that is fun for the golfer, but he also uses grey water. So he's not pulling water out of the ground to water the greens."