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COURSE CORRECTION



▲ Springdale offers scenic views of Cold Mountain, which is about 35 miles west of Asheville.

The pandemic prompts a change in plans for a Haywood County golf development.

By Michael J. Solender

North Carolina's Haywood County holds a special allure for fuel supplier Lex West, who has enjoyed visits to the mountainous region throughout his life. In 2018, the co-owner of Hartsville, South Carolina-based West Oil bought Springdale, a golf resort 20 miles west of Asheville where he and his father have played since the mid-1990s.

The golf course was started and owned for decades by New Yorkers Fred and Eunice Tingle. They bought 550 acres, used for many years as a girls camp, at a courthouse auction in the late 1960s. The couple built 18 holes in the valley below Cold Mountain, a place made famous by Charles Frazier's novel and a film starring Nicole Kidman and Jude Law.

West's initial goals for Springdale were to "polish the gem of a property in decline" and offer locals and vacationers a great golf and mountain experience like he had enjoyed over the years.

Many years earlier, West's parents had bought about 200 acres atop Dream Mountain, about a mile away and just over the ridge-line from Springdale.

"Throughout the years, my dad and I would come down to Springdale, play golf and be joined after our round by my mom and sister for a casual dinner at the tavern here," West says. "We'd enjoy the porch, the view, and the sound of the crickets and just

relax in the quiet. There's such an emotional feeling [of contentment] in the mountains. My plan for Springdale was to make that experience available for others to enjoy."

But West couldn't have foreseen the COVID-19 pandemic and a catastrophic flood that would prompt a recharting of his passion project.

West spent about \$2 million buying the property and adjacent land, giving the family a combined 1,000 acres or so. He has invested more than \$15 million in the golf course renovation, upgrades to the 19 residences that each accommodate four people and construction of Springdale Village. It includes the Village Grill restaurant, Rocky Face Tavern, a fitness center, pool and indoor-outdoor event space.

"The first pivot came just as we began to enter into COVID in late 2019," recalls West. "I came to understand it was going to take more than a renovated golf course to make the property economically viable and sustainable."

Reimagined resort

The original plan for a new Springdale called for "an old-school style design with a pro shop, clubhouse and banquet rooms — all under one roof," West says. "As COVID evolved, we were uncomfortable with that approach and shortly before breaking ground, we took a pause."

West reimagined Springdale as a resort destination for groups, events and weddings. His plans expanded to include a consolidated kitchen and dining and banquet facilities.

With people seeking outdoor, socially distanced recreation, the number of rounds played at Springdale soared in 2020, as it did at golf clubs nationally. West and General Manager Buddy Lawrence concluded that buffets, family-style dining and compact indoor spaces weren't appropriate.

"We knew we needed to rethink the original concept and have a facility that offered more outdoor space," says Lawrence, who arrived in 2019 after working at various golf courses in Eastern North Carolina.

West hired Asheville-based contractor KDC to create the village concept. The buildings retain a mountain-lodge style with the main dining and tavern hosting a wrap-around porch overlooking the closing holes. A central lawn accommodates receptions and seated affairs.

As West's team soldiered on with upgrading facilities and the golf course, Mother Nature dealt a cruel blow in August 2021 when Tropical Storm Fred caused massive flooding. Nearly 10 inches of rain was recorded in less than 24 hours in nearby Cruso, where six senior citizens died as water surged through the valley. The course-fronting Pigeon River crested at 19.7 feet in Canton, its highest level since 2004. Haywood County experienced \$300 million in damage with 225 structures destroyed by the two-day storm.

"We had seven holes completely underwater and lost every bridge on the course," says Lawrence. Springdale was closed for two months after the storm. Upon reopening, West committed 50% of the resort's revenue for the next few months for community relief efforts. "It was an easy decision to support our neighbors and the community, many who've been instrumental in building Springdale, and extending hospitality to our guests."

Springdale has much land available for new homes, but West says he's in no hurry to sell lots. "The slow feel and relaxed pace are part of the appeal to being here. There's a special emotion here we want people to experience whether golfing, hiking, fishing or just enjoying the quiet pace."

There will be time down the road for new homes. For now, West views Springdale at Cold Mountain as "a gem waiting to be discovered." ■

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