

Jacobsen Hardy to commence work at Illahee this fall

WALLA WALLA, Wash. — Ground will be broken next year on a thoroughly non-traditional development called Illahee, where an alternative 9-hole resort routing from Jacobsen Hardy Golf Course Design will be complemented by a winery, a boutique hotel and 365 residential units.

There is no clubhouse planned at Illahee (not Illahee Golf Club, nor The Resort at Illahee; just Illahee) and a large portion of the maintenance duties, once the course opens for play in fall 2009, will be shared with turf students from neighboring Walla Walla Community College.

“It’s a pretty cool project, that’s for sure,” said Rex VanHoose, senior vice president/managing architect for Houston-based Jacobsen Hardy (www.jacobsenhardy.com), the design partnership of Jim Hardy and PGA Tour veteran Peter Jacobsen. “You hear about 12-hole golf courses but you rarely see them developed. Here’s a project where the developer wanted nine and leaned on us to come up with something flexible and non-traditional.”

Illahee is all that. The property, developed by Bend, Ore.-based Abito (www.abitohome.com), has a footprint of 356 acres, 90 of which have been set aside for golf. Jacobsen Hardy’s design calls for a trio of 3-hole pods, each of which circles back to a central starting point. It’s not a clubhouse — merely a starter’s facility on the first floor of Illahee’s boutique, luxury hotel (to be operated by a third-party manager). VanHoose calls this “the resort core” and its proximity to all three loops will allow guests and daily-fee patrons the opportunity to play 3 holes, 6 holes, 9 holes, 12 holes, etc.

Also accessible from this resort core is a double-ended driving range, around which holes 1, 2 and 3 are routed. The target greens in this range area, along with strategically placed tee boxes, form their own 9-hole mini-routing. When the range is shut down, kids and novices can play this short course without clogging up Illahee’s full-length nine.

“We did a similar thing at The Rope Rider, an 18-hole project now under construction at the Suncadia Resort near Seattle,” VanHoose explained. “As for the full-length resort layout at Rope Rider, there’s a traditional 9-hole loop, but we routed the other nine to include both a 6-hole loop and a 3-hole loop. This will allow folks to play 18 holes, or nine, or six or just three. Of

course, the operational aspects of the Illahee routing are even more flexible — and it's only 9 holes total.”

Illahee's relationship with Walla Walla Community College will extend beyond on-course training for students. “Abito and Jacobsen Hardy have both been really great in terms of including us, from the earliest stages of the project,” said Bill Griffith, a former golf course superintendent and now an instructor/program coordinator for turf management at Walla Walla Community College. “In terms of our students maintaining the site, it's not 100 percent clear how that will be structured. What I expect is that a superintendent will be hired and he will also do some teaching here. Our students will certainly work on the crews. Our first-year students each do a 6-month internship and I can see them spending that time at Illahee.”

Plans are to include a classroom in the Illahee maintenance facility itself, so WWCC faculty can lead training and lab work on site. Griffith pointed out that the college also has a service technician's program that will assist in maintaining Illahee's fleet of machinery.

VanHoose has some marching orders for Griffith's students: He wants the playing surfaces at Illahee to be lean and mean. “We want it to be alive and healthy, but we want it to be conducive to the ground game because we've designed a lot of variety into this golf course and firm conditions will maximize that variety,” he said. “No. 7 is our favorite hole: You drive it from an elevated tee, down to a fairway with a pond on the right. It's 235 to clear that pond and reach the green, which is 342 as the Titleist flies. We've found that to be the optimal yardage for these drivable par-4s. Downwind, that's not hard to do. With the wind in your face, it's another story — but you have to design a hole like that for the downwind scenario. And like every great driveable par-4, if you bail out you're left with a pretty tight shot to small green, over bunkers with water behind it.”

“No one will ever get bored on this golf course,” said Steve Robertson, president and owner of Abito. “Everyone is very excited about the way the holes feel. A lot of study went into choosing our golf course design team. We think it's a perfect marriage of quality, a quiet knowing, a wink in the eye, a kept secret. Very much Walla Walla.

“This is a unique part of the planet, Walla Walla, which quite frankly hasn't been on anyone's radar for 100 years. In the last three years, it's come to

attention through high quality wine grapes. That's attracted a national audience. That's what put it on our radar for a potential destination."

Walla Walla is also one of the country's major wheat growing areas, thanks to its climate and an abundance of superbly draining, rock-free soil. This paucity of rocks influenced the Illahee design scheme: When the last wheat harvest comes off the property in August, some 4.5 million cubic yards of dirt will be moved. Each golfing pod will be excavated to a depth of 20-25 feet, creating three separate golfing amphitheaters and yielding enough soil for 365 residential units, all the course features, landscaping, and a 20-foot berm encircling the entire development.

Griffith says he likes the way "the whole development is terraced down to the golf course, making it a focal point and providing the maximum amount of green space for all the homeowners." But what he likes even more is the direct comparisons Illahee will draw between the environmental impact of wheat production and golf.

"I hope this will provide some opportunities for us, as locals, to show the positive aspects of golf development. The reduction in pesticide use, for example, will be dramatic," Griffith said. "As a golf course, we'll have 300 acres of cultivated land where 98 percent of the pesticide use is confined to 1 acre — the greens only. And with some of the new ways to apply fertilizers, we'll reduce usage even further than that. No leaching of nitrates. This property will be infinitely better than it was, environmentally.

"We're going to take an agricultural area that was at the bottom of the spectrum revenue-wise and produce more crop revenue. The revenue-producing quality of this particular piece of land wasn't very good. The 30 acres of vineyards alone will produce more."

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[For more information on Jacobsen Hardy Golf Course Design, call 281-807-4176, or visit www.jacobsenhardy.com]