

Editorial Opinion

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NAPLES BEACH HOTEL

Change will keep pieces of Naples' past

Editorial Board

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For decades now, the constant around Naples and Collier County has been change.

With growth, development and redevelopment the order of the day since before most of us arrived, it's difficult to point to a single spot and say, "That's just how I remember it on my first day here."

An exception has been the Naples Beach Hotel & Golf Club, the iconic setting spanning U.S. 41 to the beach in the middle of town.

Sure, it has gone through occasional renovations, as all hotels do. And the golf course was closed for several months in 2016 as it was redesigned by Jack Nicklaus, the legend who first realized the golfer's coveted sub-40 nine-hole score on that very tract as a 10-year-old in 1951.

But essentially, the Beach Club has been the Beach Club for as long as most can remember. Hotel rooms on the Gulf, concerts on the lawn, drinks at the Sunset Beach Bar & Grill at, of course, sunset.

Transformation

Now that, too, is about to change as the longtime owners the Watkins family transition control to The Athens Group, which joined the family as strategic partners in March.

Initial plans, which will require review and approval at several points, are for condominium towers to be added to the property and the hotel to be torn down then rebuilt at a reduced size.

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Most importantly, the golf course, representing more than 100 acres of green space, is to remain a golf course. While additional renovations are planned to the course, the hope is that it will mostly be open to play throughout the transformation.

We're happy to see that then-Collier County Commissioner Tim Nance's worst fear, expressed in 2016, that the whole property could become high-end housing, did not come to pass.

Also encouraging is the part of the plan that calls for HB's on the Gulf and the Sunset Beach Bar to be open to the public once the new property is unveiled. Other aspects of the new plan, such as a market square with activities for residents and a landscaped corridor with bike lanes, are also intriguing.

Neighborhood impact

It is difficult to imagine the traffic nightmares that the addition of eight new residential towers, demolition of an existing hotel and construction of the new one will bring to Gulf Shore Boulevard North and the surrounding streets.

The developers will need to work with the neighborhood and the city to minimize disruption.

As is usually the case when major change comes to a neighborhood, communication will be key to keeping expectations — and tempers — under control.

The Watkins family have been great stewards of this public resource, the Naples Beach Hotel & Golf Club, for more than 70 years. They've made clear for the past couple of years that they've been considering options for its future.

While many wish that things could just stay the way they were, Southwest Floridians have learned through decades of experience that rarely happens.

Change is coming again. In this case, some of what we treasure survives.

Brent Batten wrote this on behalf of the Naples Daily News editorial board.