

# Betting on

More about innovation than the status quo, this upper Westchester club has a master plan for major changes

BY DAVID GOULD PHOTOGRAPH BY JIM KRAJICEK



Brynwood's exciting par-5 17th hole is reachable in two, but hazards await around the green.

**P**icture a fine though somewhat faded country club in a secluded hamlet, busily planning an ambitious redevelopment plan that will require multiple permits to move forward. In the meantime the club receives visitors whose future dealings with it wholly depend on those permits getting approved.

Renowned golf architect Rees Jones drops by to sketch out course renovations. Master planners from the vaunted architectural firm of Hart Howerton fine-tune specifications for clubhouse work and on-site residential construction, which

includes 88 new luxury condominiums. Any such visitor would be inclined to size up the project's spokesperson without delay, deciding whether he has the smarts, experience and energy to make this rosy future seem reachable.



# Brynwood

Enter, from his office along the club's stacked-stone foyer, Jeffrey Mendell—tall, rangy, garrulous, gray at the temples and fully in command of all relevant information about Brynwood Golf & Country Club in Armonk, N.Y. As the club's principal owner and managing partner in charge of Brynwood's proposed expansion and renovation, Mendell manages to simultaneously put his listeners at ease and get them pretty psyched.

To eventually reach this distinctive, 156-acre property on a ridgetop in this picturesque corner of Westchester County, Mendell journeyed from the caddie yard at New Jersey's Alpine Country Club to the nearby Dwight Englewood School and on to the University of Pennsylvania—competing on the golf team as a prep-schooler but concentrating on academics when he got to Penn. He has been in real estate development for decades and his projects

have run the gamut from urban office towers to quiet residential retreats. His interest in Brynwood is personal, based on his love of the game and his many years as an Armonk resident. He and his partners paid \$6.3 million to purchase the 1960s-era club, formerly known as the Canyon Club, from the Mitsubishi Corporation. Over the last three years they have invested millions in some impressive clubhouse remodeling already on display.



Under Brynwood's master plan, the club's recreational amenities will sit alongside residential options designed to appeal to baby boomers.

A change to the zoning law from its current two-acre minimum is required for the handsome condominium village shown on the Hart Howerton master plan to become reality. The Town Board of North Castle gave the plan the initial green light at a meeting in late September, and now the project faces the truly hot light of scrutiny: New York State's environmental-quality review process. Two separate planning boards, the town's and the county's, also get a chance to alter or wholly reject the Brynwood Partners' vision of a residential club community for empty-nesters. If any of those agencies decides to put the brakes on the project, Mendell believes it would deprive longtime area residents who don't need their big homes anymore. He expects that his deluxe homes in multi-dwelling units would be a hot commodity in this part of upper Westchester, due to scarcity of such options.

"People who love this town and this area, and I'm one of them," explains Mendell, "don't want to move down south or to New York City and leave their neighbors and friends behind."

Brynwood 2.0, if you will, has drawn protests but has also attracted 1,500-plus signatures on a petition supporting it. Persuading the signees are benefits like the esti-

mated \$1.6 million in annual property tax revenues, plus employment opportunities. Right now the club is the town's largest source of summer jobs for teenagers.

Another way to make that case is to simply report what this club's owners intend and expect to do if final approvals for the transformation don't come through. "At that point we would demolish the club buildings, plow up the golf course and build luxury homes on estate lots."

One notable facet of the Brynwood grounds is a wing of humble guest accommodations once used by members. They harken to Armonk's one-time remoteness from Manhattan, before the construction of Interstate 684, which skirts the western boundary of the golf course. Resembling a modest Catskills hotel, they are used now as staff housing and under the master plan would be knocked down.

For all one knows this was where the blunt body styling of the 1978 Plymouth Sapporo received final signoff, in the days when Mitsubishi was rebranding its Japanese-made vehicles for sale by Chrysler. That was the era when the company's stateside executives retreated to Brynwood for golf, relaxation and meetings. Losing market share in North America and undergoing



retrenchment, the automaker sold its prized perk to Mendell and his associates in 2009.

Part of the revamp to Brynwood in its current incarnation involved reconfiguring the clubhouse so that the golf shop would overlook the first tee and 18th green, with a view toward the practice range as well. From this main desk the professional staff dispatches about 14,000 rounds a year.

"With a membership this young—and so many people in the prime of their careers—we get less 18-hole play than a lot of clubs," says Mendell. Popularity of the club pool and its new terrace is undisputed, again based on the clientele being younger and relatively more involved with work and child-rearing. The pool complex faces west to catch sundown over distant terrain, a recipe for that memory-making any club needs and wants.

Where the golf shop used to be is now a compact but sleekly modern fitness center. Elsewhere in the deceptively large clubhouse is a banquet facility that helps reduce

COURTESY OF HART HOWERTON

the monthly dues bill for members. Despite this revenue source, however, running the club with its current infrastructure isn't sustainable and would not justify further investment. "You could break even using this model, but that's about it," says Mendell.

A club that is intent on major changes in accord with a rewritten business plan could very well bump along in its daily affairs at half-speed, or slower. Under the direction of Mendell and an industry-leading management company, Troon Golf, this club does anything but. The Troon Prive group, which has 30 member-only golf facilities in its portfolio, considers Brynwood a model of innovation and recently honored it with the group's annual "rock star" award for member-pleasing programs and amenities.

These include a sports bar lounge, a new pool table and a stage area for the live bands that are booked every weekend. Adjacent to it is a large, kid-pleasing game room with a big screen for Xbox action and, at its opposite end, a tiny cinema with regulation movie seats bolted in several rows. Parents can have club staff book babysitting services for them and enjoy the evening knowing all is well. Down the hall is a business center



Players must avoid a pond on the left and a gauntlet of bunkers on the par-4 15th hole.

with a long row of iMacs installed for any member's use, free wi-fi included.

Even the little things are noticeable. "We have gourmet coffee, made fresh regularly, that you pour for yourself," says Mendell. Seeing the amenities and lifestyle that have been retro-fitted according to "what affluent families want now," as Mendell puts it, one sees the possibilities.

"Tradition is a great thing for a private club—it adds value and continuity,"

Mendell acknowledges. "But we've got some freedom to try new ideas and to me that's a very big advantage in the marketplace."

The golf course that unfurls from Brynwood's lofty clubhouse perch is a sporty 6,348-yard routing designed a half-century ago by Albert Zikorus. Scarcely altered from its earliest days, when the sign out front said Bel-Air Country Club, the Brynwood course boasts some of the Met Area's finest greens along with a challenging col-

JIM KRAJICEK

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lection of par threes. When the Rees Jones design firm sweeps through and remodels it, the back-tee yardage will be about 6,800 and a new visual character and strategic complexity is expected to show itself.

Jones, for his part, sees quality in the original bones of the course, but also omissions. "Probably due to budget concerns they didn't grade many of the fairways that we will now go in and grade, because that's where people felt they could save some money," he says of the hillside layout. Jones and his team, which includes architect Bryce Swanson, will also reinvent the teeing grounds of most every hole, adding distance and aesthetics. That work will add up to significant changes to the golf experience.

"We're changing the angle of play on many of the holes, and taking out some bunkers where they're too penal. Up at the greensites, we will end up with a lot of interesting chipping areas."

Golf course redesign plans were drawn up to mesh with the Hart Howerton master scheme, which appropriates the current 10th hole for housing but opens space for a replacement. "We will end up with a better version of No. 10—playing downhill and



Club owner Jeff Mendell seeks to redefine the private club experience at Brynwood.

with a lot of character," says Jones.

The club will stay open and fully operational during the course renovations, which aren't scheduled to begin until next winter. In fact, the club also remained open during last month's Hurricane Sandy, thanks to a large commercial generator that kept the lights on and the hot water flowing. In a move that showed community spirit, Mendell welcomed local residents to come

in and use the club's facilities during the widespread power outages.

"We believe it's the right thing to do not only for our members, but also for the people of North Castle who needed a place to go. We felt it was a civic responsibility, and it made me feel great."

It was yet another opportunity for Brynwood to show itself as a good neighbor, something that will be increasingly important in the coming months when the club's master plan is reviewed in further detail.

Mendell has a stake in the outcome in more ways than one. The proposed condominium residences contained in the plan won't all go on the market, according to him. "I personally plan to take one, and so do a couple of my partners. I would sell my house here in town and my wife and I could have a living situation that makes sense for our lifestyle," he says enthusiastically.

It's a simple proposition, in some respects—though simple never means easy in the politics of local land use. As things stand, Brynwood will quietly open its golf course for play in 2013 and wait to see if its master plan becomes a reality. ■

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