

Local couples sign purchase agreement for Easton Club

By CAROLYN SWIFT LASAKO Business Editor | Posted: Sunday, October 23, 2011 1:00 am

EASTON A group of four local couples is set to take over ownership of the Easton Club at the end of the year, after recently entering into a purchase agreement with the University of Maryland Foundation Inc. for the golf course and accompanying facilities.

Longtime Talbot County residents Bobby and Terry Higgins, Matt and Peggy Fitzgerald, Rich and Kathleen Hargrove, and Dick and Kay Phillips would be the third owners of the club, which opened under the ownership of Rocks Engineering in 1995, before being donated in 2008 to the University of Maryland Foundation Inc.

The property is expected to change hands Dec. 31 for an undisclosed price.

During a "meet and greet" Thursday night with more than 100 club members, the couples said they are committed to improving the overall experience at the club which includes everything from the golf course's greens to the quality of food at the restaurant.

"I think we're really committed to three things: excellent facilities ... delicious food and superb service," said Matt Fitzgerald, who added that steps already have been taken to improve the golf course greens, which have been struggling for some time.



Calling the members and homeowners in the development their "best friends in the process," Fitzgerald said the group wants the staff at the clubhouse and restaurant to know and address the members by name.

"We just want to make this more of your club, and one that is service-oriented," Fitzgerald said.

A few changes already are planned for the pavilion and restaurant, which would become the Riverhouse Pavilion and Riverhouse Grill, respectively. Additionally, Fitzgerald's, an Irish pub named after the Fitzgeralds, would be located inside the Riverhouse Grill.

As part of those changes, the restaurant recently welcomed a new chef, Mike Masiello, who joins the club with more than 20 years experience creating cuisine for resorts and hotels throughout the East Coast, including Marriott International, Holiday Inn and Hilton.

"We feel like we need a new identity," said Bobby Higgins, who grew up in the restaurant business and has owned and operated several restaurants over his career, including Yesteryears in Easton and Higgins Crab House in Ocean City. "What we really see here is that we need to provide a reason to keep people coming back. We want it to be an experience that makes every person who leaves here say, 'Let's go there more often.'"

Part of that effort will include creating "a warm, family-oriented atmosphere" throughout the facilities, Fitzgerald said.

"We want to have art on the walls and inject our own personality and your ideas and personality into the facility," he said to the members. "I think that is what has been lacking. It's a great piece of infrastructure, but it doesn't have that personality of people that own it that care about it."

While the prospective owners had plenty of ideas of their own to present at the meeting, the members also were eager to share their suggestions on how to improve the experience at the club. Two of the areas targeted were communication and attention to detail.

Several members requested better communication between management and members, which they said includes disseminating both good and bad news.

With a background in communications, Peggy Fitzgerald, who serves as director of communications for Talbot Hospice Foundation, said she will be taking on the task of improving communication both in-house and within the community, through a member newsletter and submissions to local media outlets.

The other big issue besides improving the greens was attention to detail, which one member said was somewhat lacking under the previous owners. In response, Dick Phillips, said, "Owners' eyes are different than other eyes. We will see things that others won't, and they will be fixed."

Overall, Rich Hargrove said, "We're here because we think we can make a difference.

"You guys have stood by this club through owners who were not golfers, who were not restaurant people, who were not managers of clubs," he said. "They were developers and bureaucrats."

As members of the local business community in various capacities, Hargrove said the group has been preparing for this opportunity all of their lives.

Rich and Kathleen Hargrove own and operate Servpro Maryland & Virginia, a fire and water clean-up and restoration business. Their sons, Matt and Nick, own the energy audit company Total Home Performance in St. Michaels.

Meanwhile, Matt Fitzgerald is a division director at Provider Resources Inc., a health care consulting firm based out of Pennsylvania. He currently works out of an office on Dover Street in Easton, but has plans to move his office on the Easton Club premises next year to make himself more available to members.

The Higginses bring to the table an extensive background in the restaurant industry, while the Phillipses are multi-faceted. Dick is an attorney in Easton with nearly 30 years in practice and Kay has managed several of the family businesses, recently focusing on sales. Kay also is active as a volunteer, producing plays through Easton High School and other organizations.

Given all their experience, Hargrove said, "We wanted this sandbox to go take what we've learned in business all our lives and apply it to a sport and an activity like eating that we love."

"That's why we're here," he said. "Nobody goes out and buys something that's losing unless they see a whole lot of opportunity in their mind's eye. We don't want to fail; we're not going to fail; we're not failure people."

Helping to prevent failure is the strong foundation the group brings to the business, having been friends for more than 15 years, since the time their children were "all swimming in the Miles (River) together," Peggy Fitzgerald said.

They've also known new head golf pro Tom Hanna for just as long. Hanna has lived in the area for about 20 years, previously serving as the director of golf at Harbortowne Resort and Conference Center in St. Michaels, coach of the University of Maryland golf team and director of golf at University of Maryland. He also played on the PGA Tour for a number of years.

"We've all known each other for 16 years," Peggy Fitzgerald said. "We're all local, we've got a lot of energy and we're excited to take over."