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Hitting the Green in the Okanagan

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Byline: Bruce Constantineau

Michael Hurdzan wants to build the greenest golf course in B.C. Not green as in colour, but green as in sensitive to the environment.

The renowned Columbus, Ohio-based golf course architect has been hired to design a new 18-hole course at the \$1.4-billion LakeStone resort being developed along Okanagan Lake, in the municipality of Lake Country.

Hurdzan said “greening” of the golf course project will be a top priority as he works to complete the design.

That wasn’t always the case when golf courses were developed in the past.

“It’s a process of constantly learning and constantly improving,” he said Wednesday in an interview from his Columbus headquarters. “There’s new technology coming out all the time that makes us a lot more conscious of the environment.”

Hurdzan plans to design the course around any areas of “high environmental value,” and noted the golf course will actually improve the quality of certain area wetlands.

“There are a couple of wetlands that receive a fair amount of water during snow melt, so plants get established,” he said. “But those areas dry up and the plants suffer.

“We plan to supplement them with water, which they otherwise wouldn’t have, so they can remain functional for a much longer period of time.”

Hurdzan said the rocky terrain of the 80-hectare course presents another challenge as there is little natural topsoil in the area.

“We’ll haul soil up and build some organic material into it by recycling wood chips or sawdust or other materials to make it more water-holding,” he said.

Water usage at golf courses is a big issue with critics, as courses require huge volumes of water to keep the grass healthy and green.

Hurdzan doesn’t deny golf courses need water, noting it takes about 40 to 50 “acre-inches” of water a week to maintain a 40-acre portion of a golf course. Each acre-inch represents about 27,000 gallons of water.

“But we use it in the most efficient way possible,” he said. “We use topsoil with organic water-retention materials, we use drought-tolerant grass, and we develop irrigation systems that give us good control over

the use of water.”

Hurdzan noted golf courses use low-trajectory irrigation heads that emit large drops of water, as spraying water high in the air creates mist that can be blown away by the wind.

He estimates golf courses now use about half the water they did 40 years ago.

“A lot of people falsely think that if a course is green, they must use a lot of water and fertilizer and pesticides. But that’s just not true. Golf course superintendents are paid a pretty good salary to take small amounts of input to get a maximum impact.”

Hurdzan said course officials will constantly monitor the soil’s water content to ensure they don’t over-water the course, and will use poly-coated fertilizers that release slowly at a rate the plants can use.

He also noted the new LakeStone course will likely use a “low-mow” bluegrass that needs less water and fertilizer than other grass varieties, and is also more disease and insect resistant.

The course was originally going to be designed by Robert Trent Jones II, but he was released from the project. Hurdzan signed on about two months ago. He has already designed several of Canada’s top courses, including Westwood Plateau in Coquitlam.

Hurdzan feels highlights of the LakeStone course will be its “awesome views” of Lake Okanagan, Wood Lake and Duck Lake, and a signature par-three hole that will force golfers to hit across a rocky chasm to reach the green.

Construction of the new course could begin next year, with a projected 2010 opening.

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HOW GREEN ARE THE GREENS?:

So what makes a golf course environmentally friendly? Here’s what Michael Hurdzan plans for the 18 holes at LakeStone.

- The course will be designed around any environmentally sensitive areas (such as wetlands).
- The developers will add more water to wetlands so they remain functional for a longer period.
- The topsoil used will contain organic, water-retaining materials such as recycled wood chips or sawdust.
- The course will feature “low-mow” bluegrass, which is more disease resistant and requires less water and fertilizer than other grasses.
- Greenskeepers will constantly measure topsoil wetness, to ensure no overwatering takes place.

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ILLUSTRATION/PHOTO COURTESY HURDZAN/FRY

The view, inset, from the planned LakeStone golf course with design above.

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BY BRUCE CONSTANTINEAU
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