



THE GATHERING PLACE

INSIGHT ON CONSTRUCTING OR RENOVATING CLUBHOUSES AND AMENITY CENTERS

Communities most often center themselves around multi-use structures in which they can assemble for various purposes, whether for public discourse, dining, recreation, or gatherings. In Southwest Florida, these multi-use structures are commonly associated with the clubhouses and amenity centers of the region's many golf courses and gated communities.

Clubhouses and amenity centers both serve many purposes for the communities and members that use them, whether it's HOA members, club members, or visitors. With resident or member numbers that can add up to thousands, the construction or renovation of these structures requires a high degree of focus on finding consensus amongst community leaders and residents, honoring their budgetary constraints, discerning their various usage parameters, and building for future growth. The process can take years and demands that a construction manager or contractor remain flexible throughout each phase of the process to assure that the final product reflects the needs and aspirations of the community and/or club.

BUILDER AS ADVISOR

Country clubs and residential developments are uniquely subjected to broader economic forces. During periods of economic cooling (or outright recessions), the cost of financing new construction increases and discretionary spending on things like country club memberships decreases.¹ Since financing can so quickly change—exemplified clearly by the global pandemic—it's crucial that a construction management firm be sensitive to project timelines and budgets. One of the most effective ways to handle those challenges is to be involved long before breaking ground.



The pre-construction delivery method can help a client navigate through all stages of the planning process. With pre-construction services, a construction management firm utilizes the full breadth of its experience and expertise to assume an advisory role for the client in which all elements of a project can be analyzed. An experienced firm can evaluate and provide input on all facets of the design to explore alternatives, or utilize innovative technologies and tools to solve problems before they arise. They can also establish benchmarks and timelines to accurately measure progress, and apply the principles of value engineering to reduce project costs while maintaining aesthetic objectives.

In a study published in *Procedia Engineering*, researchers found that most of the factors affecting a project's success can be controlled through pre-construction planning.² When considering the same study found that only 25% of projects sampled finished on time and within budget, the pre-construction service becomes all the more important to ensure any potential obstacles are considered.

One unique example of pre-construction success from the portfolio of Willis A. Smith Construction is The Lodge at Lakewood Ranch Country Club. This new construction project, designed to be the centerpiece of a prestigious residential country club, features high-end trim and design elements. However, one thing they had not considered during the exploratory phase was an acoustical assessment. "Florida is unique in that a big slice of our population are retirees aged 65 and up. So, it's important to consider sound dampening, which makes it easier for those experiencing hearing loss to communicate with others," says David Sessions, CEO of Willis A. Smith Construction. By subcontracting with an acoustics engineering firm that generated computer models of the space, the structure met the visual, spatial, functional, and auditory needs of its users.

THE LONG VIEW

Building consensus can be a challenging enterprise, whether it's as simple as picking a restaurant for dinner or as complex as hundreds of people deciding on the features of a multi-million dollar construction project. In both cases, every stakeholder brings a unique set of expectations, aspirations, and perspectives to any project. Formulating plans that satisfy the broadest percentage of those members requires patience and long-term thinking.

"In our experience with building or renovating structures like clubhouses or amenity centers, it can take as long as two years for an HOA or membership board to get consensus on what the community members want," says Sessions.

1. Why so many country clubs are undertaking massive capital-improvement projects, Golf Digest, March 15, 2022, <https://www.golfdigest.com/story/country-clubs-arms-race-capital-improvement-projects>

2. Achieving Great Project Success & Profitability Through Pre-Construction Planning: A Case-Based Study, *Procedia Engineering*, <https://bit.ly/3oNxqUi> improvement-projects

For a construction management firm tasked with executing a clubhouse or amenity center, the relationship with the client must be built with multiple years in mind to accommodate the effort required for boards and other stakeholders to conduct surveys, consider future projections, and altogether ensure that their pooled resources will be spent in service of a plurality of members or residents. “We have projects that were in the pre-construction phase before the pandemic,” says Sessions, “and reevaluating the projects for the new materials shortages and inflated costs is a challenge we help our clients overcome every step of the way, whether it’s pandemic related or otherwise.”



The contributions of a construction firm during this exhaustive process should be centered on providing up-to-date data on best practices, advice on how other similar projects have fared after several years of use, responsiveness to timely concerns as new considerations are brought up, and a vision of how the space can be infused with adaptability.

“We tell all of our clients to take their time on projects like this and demand a clear plan,” says Sessions, “because you don’t want to have to come back again in five years to make more changes.”

PHASING FOR FUNCTION

Especially with renovations of or additions to existing structures, the value of meticulous scheduling and phasing of work is crucial. For country clubs, their memberships and revenue are generally predicated on access to their golf course, tennis courts, pickleball courts, dining areas, fitness centers, or whatever other amenities their members pay to utilize. Phasing ensures these amenities remain accessible.



“When you go in and renovate or add to these spaces, they’re already occupied,” says Sessions. That means temporary facilities are often needed to give occupants a suitable short-term alternative. Examples of temporary structures can include high-quality restrooms with full plumbing, air-conditioned tent structures, or temporary storage and maintenance facilities.

In addition, the formulation of a construction schedule should take into account seasonal fluctuations in usage. “I previously mentioned the unique age demographics of the state, but in Southwest Florida we also have a population that almost doubles from around November through May,” says Sessions. This means country clubs and gated communities experience their highest volume of usage during these months. A sensible construction management firm analyzes these fluctuations and performs the most disruptive parts of the project during the slower months.

With country clubs in particular, phasing is also an important part of protecting the sensitive grading and ecology of the courses themselves, which can be damaged if not carefully considered. The key is to minimize and prevent soil erosion with the careful application of mitigation strategies. To accomplish this, a construction management firm should ensure exposed soil in and around the project site is kept to a minimum and that new phases are not started until the current phases are stabilized.³ “You can’t just go in and clear an entire site in preparation for breaking ground,” says Sessions, “because you’re guaranteed to lose top soil and you risk collapsing any nearby golf course features like bunkers or water hazards.”

DEFINING A COMMUNITY

Often, an amenity center or clubhouse are situated near the entrance to a gated community or golf course. As such, it’s the most visible structure and the one that makes a first impression on a prospective resident or member. So, the job of a construction firm is to ensure these structures mirror the style of the surrounding community, reflect its aspirations, and satisfy the ethos of its members.



Is it a 65+ community for active residents? Is it an exclusive country club for wealthy executives? Is it the family-friendly centerpiece of a community with lots of young children? Exploring questions like these helps determine what kinds of amenities, trim finishes, and features should be incorporated into the project. “A lot of people don’t realize that these buildings are really popular places to have banquets, birthday parties, or company parties, most especially for residents or members,” says Sessions. “and things like fitness centers or restaurants can be huge selling points.”

But the usage of these buildings can also change over time. “When these structures are first built, a developer is most often focused on the needs of the program at the time,” says Sessions, “but since building our first clubhouse in the 80s, we’ve noticed a few trends that can future-proof similar projects.”

One trend is the inclusion of a so-called “Nineteenth Hole,” which began as a colloquialism to denote a bar on or near a golf course complex where players grab a drink after playing a round. In recent years, the Nineteenth Hole concept has become a more formalized space separate from an existing restaurant or bar within the clubhouse that sees high usage amongst golfers.



Another trend is the increasingly food-centric usage of the buildings. Gone are the days when clubhouse or amenity center dining is perceived purely as a convenience rather than a destination. Today, members and residents demand food quality, service, and capabilities on par with their favorite restaurants.

“One of the most common renovations we do in clubhouses is expand the kitchen,” says Sessions, “and more members or event planners are hosting big events out of these spaces that require really large catering and prep kitchens too.”

3. Article S4: Practical Tips for Construction Site Phasing, Watershed Protection Techniques, Online Watershed Library, PDF accessed August 2nd, 2022



All of these elements contribute to the construction of a building that will define a community not just for today, but for the next 10 or 20 years. For the many gated communities and country clubs in the Southwest Florida region, the right project specs can determine whether these facilities are marquee assets that will attract new residents and/or members, or whether it's just some place to pour money into. For country clubs especially, where nearly 40% of their operating costs are spent on course maintenance, their success has become dependent on making the right investments for non-golf amenities and services.⁴

CONCLUSION

More than many other project types, the construction of clubhouses or amenity centers requires careful attention to relatively large groups of stakeholders. The management of a client's pooled financial resources becomes an exercise in building consensus, ensuring member dollars return value to them with the right amenities. For a construction firm, it requires a long-term commitment to be responsive, creative, and transparent as the firm seeks to bring value before ground is even broken.

ABOUT WILLIS SMITH

Willis A. Smith Construction, Inc. is a privately held construction management firm based in Sarasota, Florida. Since 1972, we have provided expert commercial builder services in the state's Southwest region. Our full-service construction and construction management capabilities are customized to address each project's specific requirements at every stage of work, creatively overcoming barriers and always meeting deadlines. Every day, area locals and visitors likely pass a Willis A. Smith project, and we are proud of the many iconic buildings we have had the opportunity to bring to the community. The growth of the area has matched our own, and today we are the region's largest commercial construction company.

4. Why so many country clubs are undertaking massive capital-improvement projects, Golf Digest, March 15, 2022, <https://www.golfdigest.com/story/country-clubs-arms-race-capital-improvement-projects>