

MIDDLETOWN

Golf club chief tees up final OK

Among the planned improvements at the township-owned country club are expanding the banquet room and installing a driving range.

By CHRIS ENGLISH STAFF WRITER

He's essentially been in charge the last two years, but if the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board approves a liquor license transfer in the next several weeks, it will be official. Rick Begley will be the top man at the township-owned Middletown Country Club.

Emerging from an executive session late at Tuesday night's meeting, the township supervisors voted 5-0 to approve a new 15-year lease to run the country club with a company Begley formed called Agro Golf. If the LCB approves the liquor license transfer, which Begley expects to happen in the next six weeks or so, Agro will take over operations from Mitchland Inc., a company headed by Newtown Township businessman Jim Worthington.

Begley has been general manager at the country club the last two years for Mitchland. Before that, he was golf superintendent. Worthington said he left the club's operation mostly up to Begley, who thought he had a deal with the township several weeks ago but then had to satisfy concerns from township officials about his financial backing.

"It's been a long haul," Begley said of the effort to nail down an agreement. "I appreciate Jim [Worthington] having a lot of confidence in me. He had a lot to do with getting this through. He's given me all the tools necessary to keep this club running and in good shape, and he's a lot of the reason it's in such good shape."

Worthington is selling the license agreement to run the country club to Begley for \$700,000, half of what Worthington paid in 1999.

The country club, operated by Mitchland since 1999, includes an 18-hole golf course, a banquet room, a swimming pool and other amenities. Begley, who's worked there 14 years for Mitchland and the previous operator, said he plans to continue all operations at the facility and, hopefully, improve them.

"I have a lot of plans," he said. "I wouldn't have gotten into this if I didn't feel I could succeed."

At recent supervisors meetings, several golfers spoke in favor of Begley taking over.

"I've been golfing there since 1956 and the course is in the best shape I can remember," said Charles Podlesny. "I know a lot of other golfers feel the same."

Recently, another group called Egos Inc., submitted a proposal to run the country club but had requested that details of its plan be kept confidential.

Township Parks and Recreation Director Debby Lamanna also sent officials a memo suggesting that Middletown hire a golf staff and run the club directly without a license agreement with an outside group. Township Manager Richard Gestrich recommended against that proposal, saying it didn't take into account what Middletown would have to pay Worthington to buy back the license agreement and it lacked other details. The supervisors opted for Begley's group over the other two options.

The country club on Bellevue Avenue was bought by Middletown in 1986. It's located mostly in the township, but part of it is in Langhorne.

Under the terms of the 15-year lease, which is renewable for another five at Begley's discretion, he will pay back \$1.2 million in township loans on the country club. Middletown has been making payments using the revenue from the facility that it has gotten from the operating company.

Middletown is using \$1 million from a \$10 million bond issue approved this year to expand the banquet room and make other improvements at the country club. Begley will pay back the \$1 million over several years.

Also, he will pay the township 2 percent of annual gross revenues when they're between \$1.5

million and \$3 million, and 4 percent when they're more than \$3 million. Annual gross revenue at the country club has been about \$1.6 million for the last two years under Mitchland Inc.

In addition to the banquet room expansion, Begley said he'd like to make several improvements to the golf operation, including adding a driving range and a threehole practice course.

To fulfill his various financial obligations under the lease, Begley said he's getting a loan from Commerce Bank and also getting financial backing from his sister Maureen Hill, and her husband, Bob.

"In my opinion, Rick deserves a shot and I think he'll succeed," said township Supervisor George Leonhauser.