

Green for Profit

by Scott McPherson

Have you ever heard the expression “one man’s trash is another man’s treasure”? What about one man’s trash being another man’s golf course? That notion is actually becoming a reality, and it proves once again the value of private initiative and the wisdom of entrepreneurialism over government control.

In the sunny suburban landscape of Sandy Springs, Georgia, a private developer has turned a former dump into a recreational area, providing local residents with an 18-hole, executive-length golf course. As the *Washington Times* saw it, “The stinky Morgan Falls landfill was a constant source of complaints from people who lived nearby and from environmental regulators concerned about pollution in the nearby Chattahoochee River. Now, golfers are admiring the ridges and valleys next to the river.” (Ty Tagami, “Converted Landfill Par for the Course,” December 31, 2002. Subsequent quotes are also from this source.)

Seeing a potential opportunity, Kay Broaddus, a Coca-Cola marketing executive who is now president of Eagle Golf Ventures, had researched demand for sports facilities in the area and concluded that many residents wanted access to a green. The trouble was that increased residential development had taken up all the choicest spots. Rather than abandon an obvious

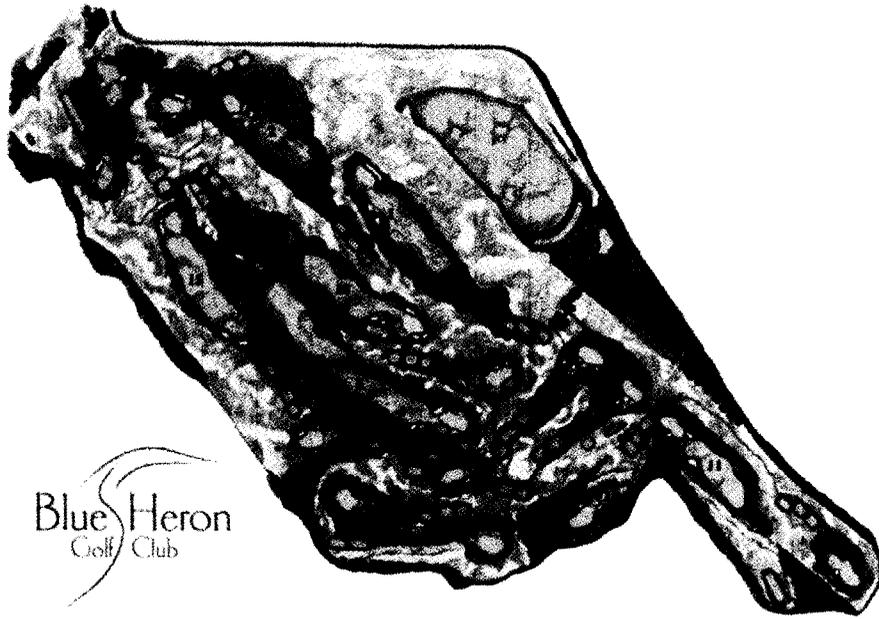
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money-making scheme, however, Ms. Broaddus set her sights on a piece of ground that was already occupied, but not exactly being put to its most gainful use.

What Broaddus was eyeing was the Morgan Falls landfill, full since 1988, and, to the concern of state officials, a major cause of erosion and runoff because of poor county maintenance. Worse, this eyesore was costing Fulton County taxpayers \$250,000 a year to maintain. By comparison, Eagle Golf Ventures could develop the landfill, remove a blot on the scenery, relieve the county of a needless expense, provide local citizens with golfing facilities, and turn an otherwise useless piece of real estate into a profitable enterprise.

Fortunately, the proposition was approved, and Eagle Golf Ventures spent \$5 million to construct Blue Heron Golf Club, after the county spent \$1 million on a methane-extraction system to ready the landfill for development. Ideally, that cost too would have been borne by Eagle, but that imperfection in the formula is arguably outweighed by one particular benefit: an end to maintenance costs alone will see the county reimbursed in just four years.

Philosophically speaking, the only thing that really soils the deal is that Eagle does not get deed to the property—it is paying rent to the county to the tune of \$40,000 a year and, eventually, a percentage of its greens fees, as well. This regime should clearly be replaced by one passing full own-



The Blue Heron Golf Club course was designed by Michael Riley. Riley started his career with the Jack Nicklaus organization and subsequently designed the Council Fire course in Chattanooga.

ership to the company. But absent that possibility, it's still a pretty good bargain for everyone. "I think it's a wonderful, wonderful addition to the community," one enthusiastic householder said of the new club.

Next Big Trend

And it doesn't end in Sandy Springs. According to Bill Love, environmental committee chairman for the American Society of Golf Course Architects, there are at least 50 other landfills in the country that have been converted into golf courses. The *Times* report credits Love with predicting "the next big national trend" as "designing landfills for use after closing." Perhaps it would be wisest to cut out the government middleman and just ask private groups like Love's to take over nationwide waste disposal.

Which raises another interesting point. Considering government's repeated inability to adapt and innovate to changing circumstances, could county or state agencies ever

be counted on to have the kind of foresight necessary to bring these kinds of projects to fruition? In the Sandy Springs case alone, 14 years and several million dollars went down the drain without any such inspiration. They can't exactly say they were getting around to it, can they? And as *Ideas on Liberty* readers know, bureaucrats and politicians are often enough more than hostile to such community improvements. (See "My Regulatory Nightmare" by Stephen Lathrop, *Ideas on Liberty*, March 2003).

Without the profit motive, a full landfill is as useless as the junk, rodents, filth, pollution, and stench that reside there. Government officials, at whatever level, stand to gain nothing for proposing such a plan. For government, \$250,000 a year to maintain a defunct investment is simply a fixed cost. On the other hand, all it takes is an entrepreneur with a little motivation to show that one man's trash can truly become another man's treasure, making the world a little bit greener for everyone. □

IDEAS ON LIBERTY

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Joseph P. Overton: Character for a Free Society



A person's character is nothing more and nothing less than the sum of his choices. You can't choose your height or race or many other physical traits, but you fine-tune your character every time you distinguish right from wrong and act accordingly. Your character is further defined by how you choose to interact with others and the standards of speech and conduct you uphold.

Ravaged by conflict and corruption, the world is starving these days for people of *high* character. Indeed, as much as anything, it is on this issue that the fate of individual liberty has always depended. A free society flourishes when people seek to be models of honor, honesty, and propriety. It descends into barbarism when they abandon what's right in favor of self-gratification at the expense of others, when lying, cheating, or stealing are winked at instead of shunned. Those who favor the steady advance of liberty must assign top priority to raising the caliber of their own character and learning from those who already have it in spades.

So it is good news for liberty when anyone, anywhere, commits his life to the loftiest standards of personal and professional behavior. It's bad news when we lose such models, and it is with profound sadness that I share some bad news with readers of this journal. The world's sum of good character suffered an incalculable subtraction with the

untimely death on June 30 of a friend and colleague, Joseph P. Overton. Killed in a tragic plane crash at the age of 43, barely three months after making his vows to the woman of his dreams at a picture-perfect wedding, he will be remembered by many lovers of liberty around the world as a man who displayed the highest character in every way.

Since his college days Joe believed that liberty and character were mutually dependent and he felt an irresistible calling to work for the advancement of both. He reached the zenith of his contributions as senior vice president at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Michigan, whose staff he joined in January 1992. You cannot walk an inch in our 23,000-square-foot headquarters without seeing his imprint—in the output of our organization to the very building itself, whose construction he supervised in 1997.

Talk to any one of our nearly 30 employees and you'll hear the same: Through his example, his mere presence in a room would raise everyone's standards of speech and conduct. As a consummate administrator he taught us the importance of continuous organizational improvement through Total Quality Management. He was able to do that effectively not just because he knew the nuts and bolts of the subject, but because he practiced it in his personal life as well. I heard him say many times, "You cannot impart what you don't possess."

Joe Overton was the straightest straight shooter I've ever known. Not a speck of deception, guile, conceit, or hidden agenda

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