singapore **scene**

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SINGAPORE GOLF'S UNCERTAIN FUTURE

The impending and premature closure of Jurong Country Club has led to questions on the presumed sanctity of government leases, and the price our golf community has to pay towards national development.

ST file photo

Imagine this: You have 15 years on your office rental, so you've decided to spend a good chunk of money – say a million or so bucks – on total renovation.

Once completed, your refurbished office earns accolades from your clients and associates.

Five years down the road, your landlord offers you a notice saying that he's taking the premises back – to build an elevator shaft, if you will.

You can either (1) take him to court and spend months or years, not to mention countless millions, fighting the case, (2) try to negotiate an alternative location at your landlord's expense, or (3) throw up your hands in defeat and try to find the gentlest way to tell your staff and customers that, sorry, time's up and they have to look somewhere else.

That is the reality that Jurong Country Club faces after being served notice by the Singapore Land Authority that their land, leased from Jurong Town Corporation, has been gazetted to make way for the High Speed Rail (HSR) between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, and planned developments in the area.

"It took us totally by surprise," says Ross Tan, Jurong Country Club's golf captain. "The Singapore Land Authority just sent someone down to the club and issued a paper that said that our land was to be gazetted for other use.

"We have written documentation that our lease will not end till 2035, but taking up any sort of legal recourse will just cost too much."

Sadly, Jurong is the one club that is probably the most unfortunate one to which this has happened. The club had refurbished its 18-hole championship course to great aplomb and accolade after a Ted Parslow-revamp.

Since it reopened in 2012, it has garnered compliments from all quarters for its playability, consistently good maintenance, and ability to take what was halfway decent, and transform it into a high quality course by any measure.

Now, this has all been a wasted effort.

"It's disappointing," says Bobby Wee, president of Jurong Country Club.

"We put up plans for our course renovation in 2010, and no one objected. The only thing the authorities mentioned was that we had to be mindful of our gross floor area. We spent half a million dollars on consultation, and another $23 million on construction. Then they drop this big bomb on us.

"One reason they gave was that they didn't want to let us know earlier because they didn't want any speculation to affect the membership prices.

"The other reason was that they had to wait until the HSR was finally announced and confirmed."

Of course, taking land away from golf clubs has recently become par for the course in Singapore, as the nation rejigs its land use to allow for national development goals like enhancing transport and increasing population.

Tanah Merah Country Club had 10 hectares of land taken away prior to its lease expiry for expansion works at the airport.

And Laguna National Golf and Country Club had a good chunk of their property sliced off (and this after they've extended their lease to 2040) so that a road and MRT station may be built.

Both Tanah Merah and Laguna National made serious concessions to accommodate these changes.

Tanah Merah had to redevelop its top-ranked Garden Course to a shortened, par-70 layout, while Laguna National is faced with having to relocate its maintenance facility, nursery and planned driving range that may incur using up land that is currently occupied by one of its courses.

For the moment, Jurong is looking at ways by which they can continue their club, albeit in a different form, and financial recourse from the authorities.

"They've not given us any alternatives," adds club captain Tan. "And they've also given us a rather short deadline to come up with a paper for our claims."

Talk is rife of Jurong teaming up with another club, and Raffles Country Club down the road has been bandied about.

"All this talk about us (Jurong) getting together with Raffles is all hearsay at the moment," says Tan. "Nothing official has been discussed with them."

Lease extension or no, the landscape of Singapore golf clubs is as uncertain as ever, and with what's happened at Jurong, even more unpredictable.

What this means to everyone right now is that regardless of whether they've got more years or not on their agreement with their landlords, nothing is cast in stone.

The ground continues to shift and where it will settle, no one knows.