

Golf '07 | Chambers Bay is a bit of Scotland near Tacoma

By [Blaine Newnham](#)
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UNIVERSITY PLACE — What aspiring new high-end golf course doesn't claim that its goal is to someday host the U.S. Open?

"You ought to go after the British Open, not the U.S. Open," an official of the United States Golf Association told Robert Trent Jones Jr., whose architectural firm has shaped the stunningly beautiful Chambers Bay course on the sandy slopes of the Tacoma Narrows.

Chambers Bay is set to open the third week of June to a public that will be asked to pay up to \$150 a round in greens fees and walk the course by either employing a caddie or toting their own clubs.

This will be public golf at its very best, or worst, depending on your point of view and how well Jones and his crew have done their work.

"Where great lands meets great water there can be great golf," said Jones. "There are so few places in the world that offer sandy soils and a maritime climate.

"Our charge was to use the site wisely and create golf art."

The site is 250 acres that has been transformed from a ravaged sand and gravel mine to a course that draws comparisons with Royal County Down in Ireland and Royal Dornoch in Scotland.

And at a royal price, of course. When all is said and done, Pierce County will have spent more than \$20 million on the Chambers Bay project, the fantasy — or folly — of the county executive, John Ladenburg.

"I'm unbelievably impressed," said Scott Alexander, the director of golf at Bremerton's Gold Mountain, the site of last summer's national public links tournament.

"I went there as a skeptic, and came away thinking Chambers Bay will be great for Northwest golf. People will come here to play it. There is simply an incredible charm about playing golf the way it was played years and years ago.

"You can spend tons of money and not get a great golf course. In this case, they did get a great course."

Alexander said not to scoff at Chambers Bay's potential to host a national tournament.

And, indeed, the USGA has already scouted the place. Chambers Bay has length — 7,500 yards — to tame a Tiger, wondrous water, island and mountain views to charm a television network, hotel rooms and

restaurants in Tacoma and Seattle to bed and feed an army, and hundreds of adjacent acres to park cars, put up corporate tents and sell golf shirts.

The men's U.S. Open has never been played in the Northwest and USGA officials admit that can't go on forever. It appeared for the longest time that a future Open date would go to Pumpkin Ridge near Portland, but there are problems with the closing holes for a championship and Chambers Bay, frankly, looks much more appealing on the surface.

The surface is moon-like, more than a million cubic yards of sand sculpted into towering dunes and jagged bunkers. Only one tree has been left on the property.

But what has all of this to do with public golf?

Ladenburg, and everyone else involved, was seduced by the site.

Pierce County spent \$33 million 15 years ago to purchase 600 acres north of its sewer-treatment plant to preserve the spot for public use and provide a release for the plant's effluent.

Golf seemed like a good idea, but what kind of golf?

"We didn't need another public golf course as such; we have plenty of affordable golf in Pierce County," said Ladenburg. "At Chambers Bay, we had the opportunity to do something different, to do something that 100 years from now we'd be glad we did.

"We saw the golf course as an economic catalyst, drawing people and events to the area and also producing revenue that could not only pay for the project but provide money for the county parks."

Tony Tipton, the project manager for Chambers Bay, said there are not only enough affordable courses in Puget Sound, but enough very good courses as well.

"We didn't want to compete against good mid-level courses like Washington National and Trophy Lake," said Tipton. "The site dictated we did something that while it might be expensive to play, it would certainly cost less than courses like Pebble Beach and Bandon Dunes."

In the peak season, greens fees will be \$150 for non-Pierce County residents and as low as \$85 for residents.

Why did it cost so much to build?

Pierce County hired an expensive architect in Jones — his fee was \$900,000 — and Jones came up with a plan that transformed the edges of Puget Sound into Scotland.

Tipton said more than 50 architectural firms expressed interest in the project.

"The RTJ Company from the very beginning shared our passion to develop the highest quality course," said Tipton. "We had the pieces of the puzzle and they put them together with their European-style course."

While working around two ridges of sand that towered 60 feet in the air, Jones and his team decided to scrape the rest of the landscape, eliminating all but one tree and moving 1.4 million cubic yards of sand off the site and then returning it to make dunes, fairways, bunkers and greens.

"That," said Tipton, "is where most of the money was spent."

It meant that more than 100,000 truckloads of sand were hauled to a cleaning site, and then returned. It meant Jones had a giant sandbox in which to dig, a vacant canvas on which to paint.

Jones used 100 more acres than a typical course. The fairways were as wide as Jones wanted them to be. One hole has two greens, another two fairways.

Also figured into the plan — and the cost — was a public-access trail that runs along the rim of the project before dipping down through the course. It will be open when the course is open, allowing walkers and joggers glimpses of play as they pass by.

The pro shop and restaurant are located on the rim as well. Players will be shuttled to the site.

There is no question Pierce County is gambling that Jones has delivered a course that will draw people the way Bandon Dunes has on the Oregon coast, where each of the three courses does 40,000 annual rounds. The county hired Kemper Sports of Chicago, the operators of Bandon Dunes, to manage its course.

According to Tipton, Chambers Bay needs to do 32,000 rounds a year at an average greens fee of something more than \$100 to break even.

"I think they'll do that," said Alexander.

If they don't, then an assessment could be levied against the home owners in the sewer district, which owns the course, to pay off the bonds.

"In a worst-case scenario," said Tipton, "we've got a piece of property valued at many, many times more than it cost to purchase and build the golf course on, and we could sell that."

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