

Trees in Ranch may go on chopping block

By LOGAN JENKINS

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A jury is deciding the fate of some 200 trees in Rancho Santa Fe.

Death-penalty cases have been decided in Texas with less soul-searching.

This intense deliberation in the Ranch is worlds apart from the recent wanton slaughter in Carlsbad.

As you'll recall, the clandestine hacking of 59 eucalyptus trees resulted in criminal charges against several La Costa homeowners and a tree trimmer.

In stark contrast, the eucalyptus, pines and peppers under scrutiny on the Ranch's exclusive golf course have been identified by orange tape for the whole world to see. Maybe they will be executed by chain saw. Maybe not.

The jury is still out.

A distressed member of the Rancho Santa Fe Golf Club called last week.

This gentleman -- at least he sounded like a gentleman -- believes the Rancho Santa Fe Golf Club is dominated by a band of insensitive ex-CEOs who have charged into the trees without the proper respect for nature.

These landmarks are "part of the community," he said. Some are sick, he admitted, but most are not.

While acknowledging that the club's members voted for the removal and the planting of young replacements, he believes the mature trees are viewed as inconvenient for inexpert players.

But that's golf, he said.

As for the argument that the grass in the rough needs more sun to grow a special strain of Bermuda, he's not buying it.

Rough is supposed to be rough, he said.

The trees on the chopping block are scattered around the course, but about 15 percent to 20 percent of the total -- and many of the big eucalyptus -- line the southern border, along La Granada.

Though the point could be debated, this stretch of country road is one of the signature images of North County, a gorgeous glimpse of a great 130-acre golf course designed for walking, not racing around in a turbocharged cart.

When I was 7 years old, my father took me to Rancho to see Gene Littler win the 1954 San Diego Open as an amateur.

I can still see -- and hear -- Littler's effortless swing as he teed off in the rain.

Even to those who will never live within the state of financial grace known as the Covenant, this course -- and the walking/riding trail adjacent to it -- is an enduring treasure.

Two days ago, I walked the path in the early morning, following hoof and Nike tracks.

A solitary golfer, an older man pulling a cart in the morning fog, followed the crew mowing greens on the back side.

Expensive new communities with million-dollar homes strive for this privileged feel, but none can re-create it. ("You could never build Rancho Santa Fe today," a developer told me once. It just doesn't pencil out.)

To my eye, some of the marked trees appeared to be ailing -- the lerp psyllid infestation has hit the Ranch's red gums hard -- but many others appear healthy.

On May 3, the Rancho Santa Fe Association's board will consider a variety of course projects. However, the arbiter of the trees likely will be the Art Jury, which is signaling that it needs more time before it can make its final recommendation.

The Art Jury has nothing to do with watercolors but everything to do with the artwork that is the Ranch. Since the '20s, the five-member panel has passed judgment on everything from paint color to major remodels.

Every two weeks, some 40 applicants petition for the jury's approval. It is the Ranch's aesthetic inquisition, the equivalent of Del Mar's dreaded Design Review Board.

Art Jury President Ken Dunford said his group has spent 100 hours studying the golf course's improvements, which include cleaning up the waterway and a practice area.

But when it comes to the thorny issue of the trees, the jurors need yet more time to mull the fate of each and every one.

In the rare world of the Ranch, there's no rush to judgment.

That's the beauty of it.