

Kitsap hopes to see some green from U.S. Open

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Kitsap Sun file Gold Mountain Golf Course hopes visitors in June to the U.S. Open at Chambers Bay will look for courses to play in the area.

PICTURE BY LARRY STEAGALL

-HIDE CAPTION



Two months from now 235,000 golf fans will descend on Chambers Bay, a public course south of Tacoma.

They'll spend a week watching some of golf's biggest names vie for a U.S. Open championship, the first ever held in the Pacific Northwest.

Those fans also will spend money, an exciting prospect for owners of surrounding businesses. The tournament is projected to have a \$150 million economic impact on the region, based on studies conducted for previous U.S. Opens.

"That's real," said Denise Dyer, director of economic development for Pierce County. "That's not fluff."

The question is how real the economic benefit will be for neighboring Kitsap County.

Chambers Bay is only about 20 miles from Port Orchard, as the seagull flies. But the busy Tacoma Narrows Bridge and a long stretch of rural highway separate the two.

Kitsap business leaders are taking a realistic view of the potential spillover effect for the county. They expect a modest economic boost in June from U.S. Open spectators, but they're more enthused about the long game: Getting those fans who visit the area to come back for extended stays.

"I think the big economic benefit will come after the U.S. Open and in the years to come," said Patricia Graf-Hoke, executive director of Visit Kitsap Peninsula.

The immediate benefit will come from golf fans who decide to stay in Kitsap. Dyer said Pierce County has a limited number of hotel rooms and visitors will inevitably seek rooms in surrounding counties.

Some hotels in Kitsap have been logging reservations for the U.S. Open week for months. Michelle Tomlinson-Hough, general manager of the Hampton Inn and Suites in Bremerton, said about 75 percent of the hotel's rooms are booked for the week of the tournament. She expects the rest to fill quickly as June approaches.

"We're definitely expecting it will be strong and beneficial," Tomlinson-Hough said of the U.S. Open.

Tournament VIPs and corporate sponsors might seek lodgings more lavish than hotel rooms. Some homeowners are offering their houses for rent during the event and could stand to make more than \$10,000 for the week.

Most of those houses are close to Chambers Bay, said Abigail Lopez of Abigail's Concierge in Gig Harbor. Lopez helped locate rental homes near the course for companies like IBM and Ralph Lauren. She has a number of properties listed around Gig Harbor and doubts U.S. Open visitors will look much farther north.

"The closer to the course, the more likely they are to rent," Lopez said.

Fans who do stay in Kitsap will need to get to and from the park-and-rides serving the tournament. So are rental car and cab companies expecting an uptick in customers?

“Oh my goodness gracious yes,” said Anthony Orlandini, manager of Enterprise Rent-A-Car offices in Port Orchard and Gig Harbor.

The rental agency is shuffling its fleet to make sure vehicles are available to meet demand. The Gig Harbor office likely will be busiest, Orlandini said.

The Port of Bremerton is gearing up for heavier-than-normal air traffic at Bremerton National Airport, the third-closest airport to Chambers Bay. CEO Jim Rothlin said the port reached out to airports near previous U.S. Open sites to find out how many planes landed for the event. Rothlin expects a large number of corporate jets and personal aircraft, though a solid estimate is hard to pin down, he said.

Dyer, who visited two previous U.S. Opens in preparation for the Chambers Bay event, said restaurants in the area should do well, particularly non-franchise eateries (visitors want to try something they can't find at home). Retailers, meanwhile, should temper their expectations for high sales. U.S. Open fans spend hundreds of dollars on tickets to the tournament and won't have energy for much else, she said.

“You're going to head to the course, you're going to watch golf all day, catch a shuttle to your hotel room, take a shower, go to dinner, and then pass out,” she said.

If there's one thing that might tempt golf fans to arrive early or stick around after the tournament, it's the allure of more golf. Golfers like to play local links when they travel, and Kitsap courses expect to see a spike in reservations before and after the tournament week.

Daryl Matheny, general manager of Gold Mountain Golf Club in Bremerton, said several Kitsap courses banded together to jointly market themselves to U.S. Open visitors. Finding the right avenue to reach incoming golf fans was tricky, he said.

“There’s really no way to get in front of the groups who come here to play golf,” Matheny said.

Still, Gold Mountain has been booking groups for time slots before and after the tournament for the past year. At Horseshoe Lake Golf Course in Port Orchard, co-owner Aline Gardner said she expects a flood of reservations in May, as visitors nail down their plans.

Groundskeepers are getting the course in prime condition, she said. “with that extra spark knowing we’ll be on the world stage.”

It remains to be seen whether golf enthusiasts will return to the Puget Sound region after the spotlight of the U.S. Open fades.

Dyer believes they will. Fans are coming from all corners of the country. Many have never visited the Pacific Northwest, and she believes they’ll be wowed by the natural beauty of the surroundings.

“I’m hoping there are a whole lot of happily shocked people here,” Dyer said.

John Powers, executive director of Kitsap Economic Development Alliance, said the U.S. Open can only help raise the region’s profile.

“Having an event with that kind of acclaim, and that notoriety around the country and the globe is a great thing for our area,” Powers said. “I see nothing but upside from it.”

U.S. Open at Chambers Bay

What: The U.S. Open golf championship

Where: Chambers Bay in University Place

When: June 15-21

Tickets: It is sold out, but some practice round tickets were available as of Friday.

Info: www.chambersbaygolf.com or www.usga.org

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