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A look at Ko Olina Golf Club's current operations and outlook for the future

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When Honolulu Mayor Kirk Caldwell directed all golf courses to pause operations on April 1 in an effort to stop the spread of the coronavirus, Ko Olina Golf Club had already been closed for more than a week.

“Our first priority, as is everybody’s, is to the health and safety of our employees and our guests,” [Greg Nichols](#), general manager and director of golf at Ko Olina Golf Club, told Pacific Business News. “We joined our resort partners who also took that same stance in [closing]. We just felt like it was the right thing to do.”

Ko Olina Golf Club has tentatively planned to re-open on May 1, but Nichols said that they are re-evaluating that on a weekly basis.

In the interim period, Ko Olina Golf Club is preparing to re-open by maintaining its facility and staying in touch with customers.

“We remain hopeful and optimistic. We hope everyone during this time can stay healthy and well, and we can’t wait to see them back on the golf course again,” Nichols said.

PBN recently chatted with Nichols to discuss Ko Olina Golf Club’s operations during this time and his outlook for the future. Here are a few takeaways from the conversation.

Course maintenance remains crucial.

Ko Olina Golf Club is working to maintain the 18-hole course — including the greens, bunker and rough



COURTESY OF KO OLINA GOLF CLUB

Greg Nichols, general manager and director of golf at Ko Olina Golf Club

— for whenever they are able to re-open.

“The greens are the most important aspect,” Nichols said. “You can’t let greens get too long, because if you do and you try to bring them back too quickly, you’ll scalp them, which might lead to algae and other serious problems.”

All of the maintenance work is being conducted by a reduced staff. Typically comprised of about 75 employees, Ko Olina Golf Club has had to trim its staff to a handful of people. The maintenance crew, which usually has 22 employees, is down to four.

“It was tough — we had to furlough everybody, and that is tough to do,” Nichols said. “We plan on bringing everybody back as soon as we can.”

Returning to normal will happen slowly.

The golf course also has retained a couple of staffers to field questions and coordinate reservations for future dates, and Nichols said that they already are getting requests for bookings for May, June and July.

“Communication is still really important during this time to let people know what we’re doing and what they can expect when we re-open,” he said.

“The weekend that we closed, we were sold out on both Saturday and Sunday — every tee time was booked. Golf is a healthy outdoor sport, and people can do it while social distancing, so we anticipate that same demand when we do re-open,” he said.

However, he said that it won’t be business as usual right away.

“We’re forecasting a slow ramp up,” Nichols said. “We are predicting about six months to get back to what would be normal.”

He said that how quickly they rebound will depend on the tourism industry and what demand for travel will look like in the coming months.

“Our play will be based largely upon those numbers,” he said.

Demographics will look different initially.

Typically, visitors to the Islands make up the large majority — about 75% — of business at Ko Olina Golf Club, while the other 25% is local clientele.

But when Ko Olina Golf Club re-opens, Nichols anticipates that Hawaii golfers will comprise a larger sector of business, at least initially.

“The weekend that we closed was probably 80% kamaaina. I think that will probably be the mix of play starting off,” Nichols said.

He projects that the number of visitors at the course will increase gradually.

“What we’re forecasting is that each month, we’ll see a greater percentage of visitors,” he said.

Keeping expenses low will be more important than ever.

With business expected to increase gradually, fewer customers will mean less revenue — not only at the course itself, but also from retail and clubhouse operations.

That means, Nichols said, that the club will strive to keep costs low upon re-opening. He said they're looking at ways to reduce maintenance costs and will defer any non-essential capital improvement projects.

"Everybody is going to be looking at trying to do business in a smarter fashion," he said. "Less revenue means we have to really watch our expenses, and we really have to operate prudently. We always try to do that. And I think everybody will be tightening their belt, and everybody will be doing business in a new way — I think we have to."

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