QUARRY HILLS DREAM A SHORT PUTT AWAY FROM REALITY

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By ELIZABETH W. CROWLEY

QUINCY - Some critics said it couldn't be done. Others said it shouldn't.

Four years since truckers began hauling more than half the dirt excavated from the Big Dig in Boston to West Quincy, the men behind the Quarry Hills development now have tangible evidence that their plan to turn a vast dumping site into what they hope becomes a world-class golf course was no pipe dream.

The site is within a half mile of the Southeast Expressway, up Ricciutti Drive from the West Quincy exit. Past piles of slate-gray dirt the size of four-story buildings, the first seven holes of the Quarry Hills golf course are ready for play.

The lush greens on the Milton side of the course overlook the Blue Hills in one direction, the Boston skyline in another and the moonscape formed by mountains of Big Dig dirt in yet another. McCourt Construction workers driving huge earth-moving machines continue to haul tons of fill into place on what will become a 27-hole course stretching across the Quincy-Milton line.

Almost 99 percent of the dirt destined for West Quincy has been delivered - 12,611,869 tons. That leaves just under 150,000 tons to go, or about 7,425 more truck trips from Boston to Quincy.

The final delivery must be made by Dec. 31.

Workers broke ground earlier this week on four new youth baseball fields and a field that meets the requirements to play an international soccer match but can be divided into four youth soccer-size fields.

Seven of the 27 golf course holes are done, five more are in the final stages of work and 10 more are being graded. That leaves five holes to be shaped, graded and seeded before the scheduled opening of the public course in the spring of 2003.

"People have no idea what's going on up here until they see it," Quarry Hills Associates partner Walter Hannon III said. "It really is remarkable when you think of what used to be here."

Once home to three municipal landfills spread across more than 400 acres, Quarry Hills was known as Quincy's dumping ground. Whether it was stolen cars tipped into one of the quarries that dot the West Quincy side of the site or old

appliances discarded illegally in the woods, the land was still used as a dump long after Quincy closed its landfill.

That all changed when a group of well-known developers brought their idea for a golf course made out of Big Dig dirt to city hall back in the mid-'90s.

The plan addressed two problems. First, city leaders wanted to do something with the land but did not want taxpayers to pay for it. Second, the Central Artery project was groaning under the weight of millions of tons of dirt it had no place to put. Quincy was less than a 10-minute truck ride away from the Boston Harbor pier where the dirt is piled - a much cheaper alternative for the Big Dig than disposing of it elsewhere.

Using public land and public money - from the Big Dig project - private developers would solve both problems while positioning themselves to make millions once the golf course, a clubhouse and function hall opened for business.

Hannon, his father, former Quincy mayor Walter Hannon Jr., Charles Geilich, a retired landfill operator and Peter and William O'Connell, have repeatedly said that they will probably be in debt once the golf course is open for business. They still need to pay for and build the 400-seat function hall and clubhouse and myriad other details on the golf course, including eight miles of golf cart paths.

Through the agreement signed by the state, city and Quarry Hills Associates in 1997, the general contractor, McCourt Construction of Boston, is earning more than $70 million of the $100 million paid out by the Central Artery. Quarry Hills Associates will get $26.4 million and Quincy $2.8 million. McCourt is getting the bulk of the money because the company is doing the work to move the dirt into place.

For the next 50 years, both Quincy and Milton will earn a percentage of the profits from greens fees, the clubhouse and function hall.

Mayor James A. Sheets' counterparts throughout Massachusetts have congratulated him for brokering the deal to transform a huge brownfield into a public recreation area at no cost to the city. His political rival, William Phelan, sees it much differently.

Throughout the campaign between Sheets and Phelan to become the next mayor of Quincy, Phelan has hammered at Sheets for "letting $100 million worth of Big Dig tipping fees slip through the city's hands to the developers."

Phelan contends that the city will receive a pittance in revenue from the site in exchange for giving Quarry Hills Associates a 50-year lease for one dollar.

Public works commissioner David Colton, the city's point man on the project, calls that a perfect example of what hindsight can do.

"What's forgotten in all that is that at the very beginning of this, it was very risky. We're talking about moving more than 12 million tons of dirt and making a facility on top of three landfills surrounded by the Blue Hills Reservation, wetlands and archeological sites. An incredible number of things could have gone wrong. The city needed the developers to take that risk, not the taxpayers," he said.

Criticism of the project extends beyond the political realm. Local environmentalists have battled the developers and the state agency supposed to ensure that environmental damage is not done, from day one.

Thomas Palmer of Milton, the director of Friends of the Blue Hills, said the unusually friendly relationship between the state Department of Environmental Protection and developers on Quarry Hills has proven detrimental to the land.

Palmer estimated that more than 40 acres of wetlands have been damaged by runoff from the mounds of clay stockpiled at Quarry Hills.

"In my opinion, the DEP has been captured by the Central Artery project. That is what is driving this, not concern for the environment but getting rid of the dirt. The DEP has behaved as if its role is not to protect natural resources but to protect the project from anyone who criticizes it," he said.

But William O'Connell, one of the developers, counters that few projects have undergone the scrutiny Quarry Hills has over the past several years.

"We are creating wetlands up here. I hope people will look at this when it is finished and focus on that rather than focusing on temporary problems that we are fixing," he said.