



## Sable Oaks Golf Course Gains Audubon Certification

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By Duke Harrington dharrington@keepmecurrent.com



Photo by Rich Obrey

*Noah MacVane, a groundskeeper at Sable Oaks Golf Club in South Portland, works around the 13th green on Monday, planting a red twigged dogwood tree in a marshy area along the banks of Long Creek. The golf club was honored this week for its work in helping to protect the Long Creek watershed.*

SOUTH PORTLAND – The 13th fairway at the Sable Oaks Golf Course in South Portland is about to get a little more difficult.

“This already is one of the most challenging greens in the state. It’s an extremely hard hole,” course superintendent Matt TenEyck said on Monday. “What we’re doing now with this is, we are actually changing the way this hole is played, making it potentially even harder.”

But those changes are not being made merely to frustrate area divot divas. The plan is to restore that natural conditions of Long Creek, which flows through the middle of the course, adding a 50-foot buffer zone to an area of the fairway that, not so long ago, was tended right up to the edge of the stream. It is part of an effort to restore habitat for bugs in Long Creek, to bring back trout and meet certain water-quality standards by 2020, the ultimate goal of the Long Creek Watershed Plan, created in July 2009.

“I think it takes a true stormwater geek to get really excited about the bugs, but generally, when a golf course is more environmentally friendly, it’s just a nice place – it’s a more beautiful golf course,” said Tamara Lee Pinard, executive director of the Long Creek Management District, as well as stormwater program manager at the Cumberland County Soil and Water Conservation District.

“I play golf all over New England and Sable Oaks has some of the best greens and fairways,” said Bell, whose firm is helping Sable Oaks obtain the Audubon certification. “It proves that ‘environmentally friendly’ can translate easily into ‘great conditions.’”

“Reclaiming this much, this is a lot,” said Forrest Bell, senior scientists for Portland-based FB Environmental Associates. “To leave a buffer of this width is a really big deal.”

On Tuesday, officials from city, county and state government were on hand to help plant red osier dogwoods, choke berry bushes and other plants along the stream that separates tee from cup on the Par 3 green. That digging was done in part to celebrate Sable Oaks’ recent certification in environmental planning from the

Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses, the first of six steps leading to recognition as a Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary.

“We welcome Sable Oaks Golf Club’s commitment to the environment and management of the golf course with wildlife in mind,” said Jim Sluiter, staff ecologist for Audubon International, in a release announcing Sable Oaks’ effort to stand alongside the Portland Country Club, the only golf course in Maine with full sanctuary certification.

According to Pinard, Sable Oaks, at 154 acres, is the largest single lot of 127 along the 10 miles of Long Creek and its associated tributaries. Impervious surfaces – roofs, parking lots and other hard areas that speed stormwater runoff into the stream – cover between 11 and 67 percent of each of those lots. Eight percent is enough to impact water quality, says Pinard. Because of that heavy development, Long Creek does not meet minimum state water-quality standards.

That realization led to the creation of the Long Creek Management District, encompassing 2,240-acres and four municipalities, from Blanchette Brook tributary at the Colonel Westbrook Industrial Park, past the Maine Mall to Clark’s Pond and out to the Fore River.

When the management district was formed two years ago, landowners of an acre or more of impervious surface were given a choice for how to meet Maine Department of Environmental Protection standards created to restore the stream to former health. They could obtain individual permitting or join the district under a general permit, at a cost of \$3,000 per acre, for 10 years.

“We operate on a cash basis because it was really important to the landowner that we not be taking out loans and that sort o stuff,” said Pinard, pointing to work on settlement basis at Texas Instruments slated for next year, as well as a 2014 mitigation project around the Mall.

“This is a real public-private partnership,” said Pinard. “We want to do what’s best for the stream but we also want to do what’s best for the property owners in the district.”

According to Pinard, only one property owner, who controls four of the 127 district parcels, is not in compliance. Of the rest, one, the MTA Administrative Building, already has met state standards, while three – UPS, the Wyndham Hotel and Capital Automotive – have pressed on with individual permits in progress when the Long Creek Management District was launched. The remaining 119 parcels fall under district auspices, said Pinard.

But given the amount of development surrounding Long Creek, Sable Oaks presents some of the best available wildlife habitat in the watershed.

“Preserving that habitat and improving the water quality in Long Creek, made joining Audubon’s Cooperative Sanctuary Program a win-win for both the watershed and the golf course,” said TenEyck.

That’s true in more ways than one. Because it is creating the buffer zone on its own dime, the golf course will get a discount on its watershed dues.

“Instead of Long Creek having to come in and do these plantings, they’re doing it, so they get that in-kind value,” said Pinard.

However, Sable Oaks also got to make a trade with the Department of Environmental Protection, which allowed TenEyck to cut back some areas along Long Creek had become overgrown with “larger woody materials that were obstructing the playability of the golf course,” particularly at the course’s signature 14th hole.

“The Long Creek Advisory Board approved the design plan for new plantings on Hole 13, and DEP allowed me to do what I needed to, to make the restoration efforts easier,” said TenEyck.

At one time, said TenEyck, the greens on Hole 13 were tended right up to the edge of Long Creek. That made life easy for golfers, who could easily recover the results from an errant swing. Now, those dimpled balls, which can run between \$3 and \$5 each, are lost forever when they fall into a newly created “enhanced riparian zone” that extends 25 feet from the stream. That and another 25-foot-long “no-mow zone” are designed to slow runoff into the creek, absorb chloride and other toxins and shade the stream bed, to both lower water temperature and increase dissolved oxygen.

“It all helps the stream act more like a stream,” said Pinard. “The warmer the water is, the less oxygen it can hold.”

TenEyck credits Sable Oaks owner Ocean Properties with getting on board with the mitigation project, along with part-time landscaper Al Hardy, the course’s “No. 1 ecologist.”

“The long-term goal for Sable Oaks is to have the water cleaner when it exits the golf course that it was when it came in,” he said.

But then there’s the matter of how the change will affect players. Sure, says Bell, the 13th hole with a wild swath through the middle of it is nicer to look at, but as TenEyck notes, it may take an extra stroke to make it over the stream, from a newly created “drop zone” for balls lost in the off-limits rough.

“I don’t know how much some will like that,” said TenEyck, “but I haven’t been giving out my cell number.”