

## MIDDLETOWN

## Golfer says club will be up to par

*Rick Begley is taking over the operations of the township-owned Middletown Country Club.*

By CHRIS ENGLISH COURIER TIMES

Growing up next to the 16th hole at the Yardley Country Club, Rick Begley embraced golf at an early age and has never let go.

He always dreamed about being at the top of his own golf company, running his own show.

Begley, 44, got that wish recently when he reached an agreement with Middletown to take over the operation of the township-owned Middletown Country Club on Bellevue Avenue in Middletown and Langhorne.

A company he named the Agro Golf Corp. takes over for Mitchland Inc., a group headed by Newtown Athletic Club owner Jim Worthington that had run the country club since 1999. Begley had been Mitchland's general manager at the club for the last two years and the golf course superintendent before that.

After buying the license agreement to run the facility from Worthington for about \$700,000 — half of what Worthington paid nine years ago — Begley was given a new 15-year lease from the township, with an option to renew for another five years at his discretion.

In addition to the 18-hole golf course, Agro Golf will continue running banquets and the swimming pool at the club. Begley hopes he'll be able to add some other elements down the line, including reopening the restaurant that had closed several years ago.

"I'll enjoy being my own boss," said Begley, a Morrisville resident. "I was practically raised on a golf course and it was always my goal to run things myself, and this will fulfill that. I'm very confident we'll do well here."

Begley has worked at the club the last 14 years, first for Golf Corp. and then Mitchland. His plans for the club will be helped by Middletown, which plans to use \$1 million from a \$10 million bond issue to be floated this year for improvements at the club. Begley will pay back the \$1 million starting in the fourth year of his lease.

Begley said he'll use part of the money to expand the banquet room to increase capacity from about 180 to 250 to 300.

"The time he has before he has to start paying this back should allow the marketability of that expanded banquet room to really kick in," said township supervisors Chairwoman Lisa Pflaumer. "We wouldn't have made this agreement with Rick if we didn't feel he was capable of making the country club thrive. We have faith in his ability to turn the business around."

While the township does not lose money on the club, Mitchland lost about \$2.5 million there since 1999, including losses of more than \$500,000 in two different years. Losses slowed the last three years, from \$287,000 in 2005 to \$186,000 2007.

Annual rounds played at the golf course also have fallen from highs of about 30,000 when Mitchland took over. But they have been on an uptick the last three years, from 22,682 in 2005 to 25,162 last year.

Begley said his hands-on experience and approach, the money from the township and other factors should combine to make the club a success under his watch.

"I worked for a company called Club Corp. for 10 years," Begley said. "They're one of the largest golf management companies in the U.S., and seeing how they did things helped me. You have to watch your spending and have your managers financially responsible for their own departments. You can't spend more than you take in."

Mitchland possibly fell into that trap after investing about \$750,000 in the club during its first three years, Begley said.

Worthington admitted his company might have overspent at the country club.

"When we got involved, we wanted to make a big splash and always spent a lot more on

fixing things up and doing other things than we probably should have," he said. "But nobody can say we didn't keep the facilities up, and in fact, we vastly improved them. I think we left it in a lot better shape for the next guy, which is Rick, and he'll do a great job."

Begley has no lack of confidence.

"I'll have control of everything and I think I can make it work," he said. "The expanded banquet room should eventually allow us to book more and larger weddings and other events. I also have a lot of ideas for the golf course, like creating more opportunities for nine-hole play, a driving range and maybe leasing some additional land to create more room. Bringing the course up to the next level should help, too."

The township money will help with all that, Begley added.

Under his agreement with Middletown, Begley also will assume the township's \$1.2 million debt at the country club, loans the township has been paying back with its share of annual revenue from the facility. Begley has the term of the lease to repay the loans, said assistant township manager Frank Farry, who deals closely with issues at the country club.

In addition, Begley will pay the township 2 percent of annual gross revenue from the country club when it is \$1.5 million to \$3 million, and 4 percent when it is more than \$3 million. Annual revenue has been about \$1.6 million the last two years. It eclipsed \$3 million in one year under Mitchland, in 2000.

"I think Rick will do a good job there," said Farry. "He's been there an extremely long time, knows the golf course like the back of his hand and is familiar with the regular customers there. It's a nice facility and, with an influx of capital, I think the country club has a great opportunity to expand its base under Rick."

For more information on the Middletown Country Club, including rates, call 215-757-6953 or visit on the Web.



Rick Begley says he's confident the Middletown Country Club can thrive. ART GENTILE / **COURIER TIMES**