

## CLUB OF THE MONTH &gt;

## New age face of the game

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**P**ETER Vlahandreas and his GreenSpace management team have transformed yet another public golf facility, Freeway Golf in Melbourne's leafy inner east, turning it into a thriving hub and the face of new age golf.

But Vlahandreas is quick to point out he could not have done it without the vision, foresight and partnership of the Boroondara Council, which was prepared to shut down the course in Balwyn for two years.

It's a crisp, sunny Melbourne winter's morning and Freeway Golf is buzzing with activity. The players are diverse – young, old, men and women, tattooed tradesmen and dapper retired gentlemen. Their inclusive and relaxed demeanour is evident and adds to the vibrant atmosphere.

Freeway was closed for two years during Covid and the construction of the North East Link Tunnel on the north side of the property.

The course lost two holes. So, with the help of Pacific Coast Design the layout was re-designed re-routed and new turf laid. The fairways are now Santa Anna grass and the greens are a bent grass mix.

"The superior quality condition of the course is now rivalling its private neighbours,"



Vlahandreas spruiks with pride. "This is very important for public access golf."

Boroondara City Council and GreenSpace wanted to make Freeway Golf a genuine public access facility. This means no season or yearly passes or memberships are on offer.

"Everyone who plays here, pays to play. In our opinion this is the ultimate public access facility," Vlahandreas says.

The course is a par 66 and 67 and has gender neutral tees – its orange purple and

green marker configuration believed to be the first of its kind in the country as opposed to playing from traditional coloured tees of black, blue, white and red.

Golfers play off the short course, the medium course or the longer course markers depending on the day.

It's one of the many innovations at Freeway Golf Course. Another is casual dress for the staff. Everybody, including the boss, dresses in relaxed mode with company hoodies, t-shirts, shorts and runners the order of the day.

There is no dress code for players. People can dress however they want to dress.

"We welcome music. We welcome dogs. We welcome groups of six where possible," Vlahandreas says.

"For us it's all about coming to play golf, having fun and enjoying an amazing community amenity only 10 kilometres from the CBD in the leafy inner suburbs of Melbourne.

"As long as you look after our golf course, keep up with the group in front and are polite and courteous to our team, it doesn't matter to us how you play.

"And that is really important to us to drive as a company as our vision and mission. It also aligns with the City of Boroondara's mission to make this facility equitable and open to everyone within the community."

**COMMUNITY ASSET**

From the outset, the Boroondara Council has made no bones about its preparedness to invest in the community asset that is Freeway Golf.

There are a lot of council golf courses around the country that are tired and rundown. They are in dire need of modernisation.

Their management style and how they welcome people are outdated.

Vlahandreas says the City of Boroondara needs to be commended for not only shutting Freeway Golf down for two years but also to reinvest in it and bring the facility into the modern era.

"It (the council) has aligned with what and how people want to play golf," he added.

A number of golf and non-golf activity programs are planned over the next 12-18 months to make sure Freeway Golf becomes a genuine community facility.

"The non-golf things are as important as the golf activities. "Being a golf course, golf is our main focus. We're directly aligned with Golf Australia and the PGA programs – MyGolf, the Get into Golf activities.

"And we are one of only a couple of public access facilities in Melbourne who has just formalised a commitment to the Youth on Course program."





As part of this, juniors are able to play golf at Freeway after 3pm seven days a week for \$2. And if they don't have clubs, Freeway has sets they can use for free.

Beyond golf, programs are afoot for people to bring their dogs on course for a walk or to take part 'vegetation walks' around the three diverse vegetation areas on the property.

There is also an undertaking to make the course as sustainable as possible by 2033, again in line with council strategic objectives.

There is a long-term strategic plan to have Freeway Golf develop into a 'community-centric' facility. There has been a lot of thought put into how people use the facility not only today but in the next 20-25 years; it's an exciting future.

**HIP POCKET NERVE**

Council went to tender on the management in late-2022 and quickly settled on GreenSpace as its partner.

"We say 'no' more than 'yes'. These are long term relationships," Vlahandreas says of his company's philosophy.

"These are not short-term cash grabs. We are in it for the long haul. We want a partner. We don't want a transaction. That's really important because it allows us to do great things."

GreenSpace now manages four golf courses around the country – two in Melbourne and two in South Australia.

The other Melbourne facility is 120-year-old Royal Park, which like Freeway Golf was in the doldrums. Since GreenSpace took over the management of Royal Park, it has been transformed into a thriving community hub.

Up to 1000 rounds of golf a week are being played there. Royal Park recently hosted over 100 children and family members at an Easter egg hunt. Many of the guests were non-golfers who had never been to a golf course before.

Naturally Easter Bunny turned up and four jumping castles and four face painters added to the fun.

Vlahandreas has put it all on the line to found GreenSpace.

"I don't have a corporate office or a marketing team, you're looking at it," he says. "It is purely

based on my love for the game and love for the industry.

"And I got sick of hearing all the data, all the talk and all the trends that are happening. I just decided to start doing it. And the results are showing."

The company's two sites in Adelaide are Regency Park – a nine-hole layout with SHANX Mini Golf course beside it. Since GreenSpace took over in mid-2020, it has become the most utilised golfing facility in the state.

Close to 100,000 people passed through Regency Park in the most recent financial year.

The other facility in SA is Little Para, in Adelaide's northern suburbs. It's a nine-hole par-three course with a full-length driving range. And lots more exciting, modern amenities that will be introduced.

"In my opinion, Little Para is an amazing template for where public access golf needs to be," says Vlahandreas.

"It's the most exciting project I've got right in front of me. It's a great grassroots site for golf and game development. It's short and it is fun.


And the nine-hole par-three course would be in the top five in the country without even thinking about it. And no one knows about it."

Like all GreenSpace projects, Freeway Golf involves a significant investment by the council and the company over the long-term.

"We're prepared to back our vision, we're all in on changing the landscape of golf in Australia. It's the only way I know how to do it. If you can't back yourself, then who are you going to back?"

"The act of doing is the challenge in golf. But this is changing with strong leadership within Golf Australia, PGA and Government... they're on the right path."

Collectively between our national bodies, government and companies like GreenSpace golf is changing, it's more inclusive, it's fun and its delivering golf how this generation and the next ones want to play golf.

"We're only getting started, we have a whole heap of things in our fun bag to offer the golf industry," says Vlahandreas with a wry grin. 



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