

Getting It Right

A success story from Lake Merced Golf Club.

BY BO LINKS AND AL OPPENHEIM



Once all of the improvements on the golf course were done, the membership at Lake Merced Golf Club treated themselves to a new clubhouse with a 19th hole that would make even the rich and famous jealous.

Can it really happen? If it can, how in the world do you get it done? The answer is yes, and it happens when a club's leadership sees an opportunity, confronts political reality, and seizes the opportunity to build for the future.

In this case, "it" is the complete rebuilding of a club's infrastructure — a state-of-the-art recycled water storage/distribution tank, a spanking new maintenance facility, and a completely remodeled clubhouse. And it really did happen, all within a remarkably short time span — and within just a few years after a major golf course renovation project — at a venerable club that is more than 80 years old.

The genesis of these projects stemmed from years of neglect and leadership that, for one reason or another, was unable to accomplish the vital things necessary to propel Lake Merced Golf Club into the future. The sad result was that the club's maintenance staff labored under the roof (and literally on the dirt floor) of an outdated

maintenance facility for many years. Well water was drawn exclusively from the local aquifer until political pressure mounted to the point of forcing the club to use recycled water. And, all the while, the membership — yes, the folks who pay the bills — inhabited an old clubhouse that was beginning to fall apart.

Fortunately, the club took the correct first step by restoring its prime asset — the golf course — before anything else. While that sense of priority is cause for celebration, the real miracle is that the club did not stop there, but continued to complete *all* of its major capital projects over a very short time span. Now, with everything completed, the maintenance staff can properly care for the golf course and the membership can enjoy the creature comforts of a first-class golf club.

The purpose of this article is not to provide a cookbook for getting the work done, but rather to recount the experience of one club that made a commitment to the future that many

other clubs dream about making, yet somehow never turn into reality. Hopefully, this experience will demonstrate — particularly to green committees and individual members — that progress is possible . . . if you work for it.

SEEING THE NEED, COPING WITH POLITICAL REALITY, AND FORGING A SOLUTION

Where do we begin? Where else but with water, the essential ingredient for any successful golf course operation. At Lake Merced Golf Club in Daly City, California, the chickens came home to roost at the end of the 20th century. Laid out in 1922, the course was first remodeled by Dr. Alister Mackenzie in 1929 and again in 1965 when a freeway gobbled up several holes. By the mid-1990s, the greens had fallen victim to uncontrollable nematodes, poor drainage, and black layer development, so the governing club officials had to act. Under the direction of Rees Jones, celebrated architect who renovated several U.S. Open venues, the course

was remodeled and placed back on a sound agronomic footing. (This project was the subject of an earlier article, "Fairway to the Future," *USGA Green Section Record*, July-August 1997.) This aside, one undeniable truth remained unchallenged: The club continued to survive on well water pumped from its own property.

As the club approached its 80th anniversary, the water level in nearby Lake Merced had dropped to low levels and environmental groups began lobbying for curbs on the use of well water by local golf courses. As a consequence, pressure began to mount for Lake Merced Golf Club to convert to recycled water. The conversion issue is nothing new. Esteemed courses around the country have made the switch; a prime example is Pebble Beach Golf Links, the site of four historic U.S. Open Championships.

The first hurdle at Lake Merced Golf Club was for the Board of Directors to become educated as to the need and environmental wisdom of converting to recycled water. That part was easy, although it took a little time. As the club moved forward to negotiate with local government officials, it united with two neighboring clubs, combined resources, shared a collective knowledge base, and proceeded to craft a creative and intelligent program for converting. Among the key strategic moves were the employment of knowledgeable water rights counsel and the retention of an experienced water expert who helped define acceptable benchmarks for recycled water quality. The result was an agreement that guarantees the availability of good quality recycled water, while at the same time preserving reasonable uses of well water for key areas like greens and tees.

That done, the club set about constructing a new storage and delivery system. As we assessed our physical plant, we realized that the superintendent had been balancing on a tightrope for decades. Our existing storage capacity was slightly in excess of 60,000 gallons. Sound like a lot? It isn't. Lake Merced G.C. pumps, on average, upwards of 2,000,000 gallons each week. Although the storage capacity issue had been passed over for years, we knew full well that we were living on borrowed time. If we ever hit a snag with our wells, we would be in for trouble — with a capital T.

We decided to construct a million-gallon underground storage/distribution tank that more than accommodates the course's ongoing needs and provides a reasonable cushion should the wells fail or we encounter a problem with the quality of newly delivered recycled



When the work day starts and ends on dirt floors, who can blame a maintenance staff for having low morale?



After moving into a new, state-of-the-art maintenance building, staff morale hit an all-time high, as it became clear that the members' number-one priority was the proper care of the course.

water. The new tank is divided in half to simultaneously accommodate 500,000 gallons of recycled water and 500,000 gallons of well water. The tank is virtually invisible, as it runs 20 feet underground and the portion that sits above ground is surrounded by an effective greenbelt composed of trees, shrubs, and mounds.

In addition to the tank, we installed the latest computer-controlled delivery components available. In so doing, we are able to blend our water to customized specifications and deploy it to any of 2,300 sprinkler heads at any time. This unique system includes a pump station with two separate motors, one for each type of water. The construction of the storage tank and delivery system began in June 2003 and went on line in January 2004.

GOING FROM DIRT FLOORS TO THE 21ST CENTURY IN ONE EASY PROJECT

While we were dealing with the water issue, it became readily apparent that

the maintenance department desperately needed a new facility. The existing facility consisted of a small cluster of corrugated steel buildings, one of which dated back to the club's founding in 1922 and, remarkably, still had the original dirt floors. We were short on storage space, so many pieces of valuable equipment had to be stored outside in the open. Chemical storage was not up to par and the areas for workers, not to mention our professional staff, were sorely lacking in amenities.

The first issue to tackle was location. The existing facility was in the middle of the golf course. Although the membership initially was skeptical of moving the facility to the southwest corner of the property, we made a concerted effort to educate them on three essential facts. First, the cost of the move was negligible, as we could save on underground utilities and related costs by connecting at our property's edge. Second, given the fact that virtually all equipment is motorized, utilizing a corner location (as opposed to a central

location) had minimal impact on maintenance activities. Third, and most important, by moving the maintenance building we would avoid having heavy truck traffic passing directly in front of the clubhouse and through the middle of the golf course — as it should be.

We have also gained a wonderful side benefit from relocating the maintenance facility; the area previously occupied by our old maintenance facility has been opened up for other uses. It may remain open space to enhance the look and feel of our parkland course, we may create an additional practice hole where members can hone their short game, or we may even construct quaint bungalows for members and guests to use for golf-related activities. The point is that we now have *much* more flexibility than ever before.

One of the other valuable by-products of the new maintenance building is the lift in staff morale. It is as if each member of our staff has been reborn, and the superintendent now has an office worthy of his importance to

our operation. As a result, the entire maintenance crew is more enthusiastic, and they truly appreciate the fact that the membership has said loud and clear that the care of the course is priority number one.

In one sense, the club leadership is prouder of the new maintenance facility than it is of our new clubhouse. The reason? Getting approval for the maintenance facility took a *lot* more work. Compared to other club projects, the maintenance facility was an orphan, always pushed to the side when seemingly more important needs surfaced to gobble up scarce dollars. The project took slightly less than seven months from start to finish. Construction began in June 2004, and we began phasing in operations in the new facility in January 2005.

ALL THIS AND A NEW CLUBHOUSE, TOO?

It may be impossible to comprehend, but at the same time the club was constructing new water storage and maintenance facilities, it also faced the largest construction project in its history — a new clubhouse. Although we were able to utilize existing structural steel and opted to stay within the same footprint (in part to avoid public hearings on a building permit), the club still faced a massive project of unprecedented financial scope.

After forming a strategic planning committee and thoroughly vetting the alternatives, we were able to build a strong consensus for the project. It was approved by a 10-1 margin. Construction began in August 2003 and the new clubhouse opened in mid-February 2005, just in time for the club's 83rd annual meeting.

The new clubhouse completes the infrastructure renewal. Included in this project was a relocated pro shop, expanded locker rooms, a casual café to complement formal upstairs dining, expanded kitchen space, and updated meeting rooms and administrative areas. While the building has been



Unbeknownst to most members at Lake Merced Golf Club was the fact that valuable maintenance equipment sat outside where exposure to the elements shortened its useful life expectancy.



Lake Merced Golf Club constructed a 1-million-gallon storage tank that runs 20 feet below ground level to store well and recycled water for course irrigation.

thoroughly remodeled and several function areas shifted, we were able to preserve views of the golf course that are treasured by the membership. In addition, we replaced a pedestrian, 1960s-style structure with a classic, shingled building that is warmer and much more inviting to the eye. One touch we added was a large street clock near the first tee to help players start on time and also allow those making the turn and completing their rounds to track their pace of play.

DID THIS REALLY HAPPEN?

All of this work was truly remarkable, especially the fact that it was completed over a two-year period. It required a substantial investment that, fortunately, our members supported from start to finish. To be sure, there were concerns about budgets and borrowing, but in

the end, everyone came to realize that leadership was doing the things that needed to be done — things that had been delayed for too many years.

The scope of our work represents a renaissance for any golf club. Now that we have the dust behind us and the turf has never been healthier, our members take justifiable pride in knowing that they belong to a club that did the job right — not only for themselves, but for generations yet to come.

BO LINKS is a USGA Green Section committeeman. He served as president of Lake Merced Golf Club while these projects were completed. AL OPPENHEIM served with him on the board of directors and, for the last eight years, has chaired the club's green committee, a standing committee that does not change from year to year.