

# It's About Time

A comprehensive time/labor study can help prioritize limited resources.

BY ROBERT VAVREK

Private clubs are finding it increasingly difficult to replace the 5% of members who are typically lost each year due to factors such as the slow economy, the increasing age of the golfing members, lack of sufficient leisure time for four to five hours of golf, or simply too many other choices for golf. Similarly, rounds of golf are down at most public courses and fewer and fewer golf outings, the universal cash cow of both private and public courses, are being booked each season. Regardless of the reasons for reduced golf revenues, most superintendents face the difficult challenge of achieving a high level of course conditioning under severe budget limitations to meet the expectations of golfers who are generally paying higher dues or higher green fees each season.

Assuming a superintendent runs a relatively tight ship with respect to maintenance operations, the policy or mandate of doing more with less is not a sustainable long-term option. After all, there is only so much fat that can be trimmed from a steak or a maintenance budget before the value and quality of the end product are noticeably affected. But how do you justify your budget or explain how course conditions may change in response to significant budget cuts in a manner that all golfers can clearly understand?

There isn't much wiggle room in the budget for line items, such as fuel, fertilizer, electricity, and fungicides, and their costs generally increase every season. As a result, the line item for labor, which typically represents 50% to 75% of the maintenance and equip-

ment replacement budget, will bear the brunt of severe budget cuts.

You could simply reduce the size of the maintenance crew or take the time to determine how much labor is required to maintain each area of the course, and then make changes to the budget based on these data. When the data are accurate, you can prioritize maintenance operations, and the time/labor study provides valuable information to golfers and your supervisor just how a budget cut will affect play.

Guesstimate how much time it actually takes to perform a specific task, and this exercise becomes practically worthless. Have a dependable, well-trained employee perform a familiar task and use the amount of time it takes to complete that operation as a baseline. In addition, have different employees perform the same basic task under similar growing conditions and compare the time to completion. You may discover a more efficient way to perform a maintenance practice. Try to minimize fudge factors, such as bathroom and cigarette breaks or spending an extended amount of time for equipment cleanup when collecting time data for a specific task. On the other hand, keep in mind that you are trying to determine a reasonably efficient average time for completing a task, not trying to break the Olympic record for fastest weed whacking.

Budget cuts often require employees to multi-task. If an employee mows collars and then mows tees, then he or she will have to accurately determine now much time is spent on each operation. Naturally, some employees

are more efficient or motivated than others, and the process of developing a time/labor study can help identify potential candidates for promotions. There is a saying in business that may provide even more motivation for time/labor studies . . . *what is measured gets done.*

I often hear complaints from superintendents that far too much time and labor are spent maintaining perfect bunkers, yet few take the time to determine the actual cost of bunker maintenance. Granted, it isn't an easy number to determine when you consider the effort it takes to accurately document the aggregate cost of bunker raking, bunker edging, string trimming, herbicide applications/weeding, adding sand, measuring/distributing sand to a consistent depth, and repairing washed-out bunker faces after a heavy rain. However, you can make a very strong argument to a golfer, owner, or club president that their expectations for bunker conditioning need to be more reasonable when the cost of bunker maintenance exceeds the cost of maintaining greens.

Dollars make sense to golfers and those who approve your budget. If you haven't attempted a time/labor study for your course, *it's about time* you do.

BOB VAVREK makes Turf Advisory Service visits in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. An on-site visit can be especially helpful to determine maintenance priorities when operating budgets are stretched to their limits.