

Five Mistakes to Avoid When Reducing Maintenance Costs

A tough economy is forcing most golf facilities to reduce their operating budgets. The top five mistakes to avoid when doing so have been identified by USGA Green Section agronomists.

BY BOB BRAME

The purpose of a golf facility maintenance budget is to produce desired course conditioning and playability. When aligned with the intended end product, preferably via written and implemented maintenance standards, the operating budget will ensure that agronomics, economics, and even politics at the golf facility are in proper balance. When there is a need to reduce the budget, it should come with the realization that the end product, in this case the golf course, will likely change. Reducing inputs and expecting the same output is very seldom realistic. This does not necessarily mean that change is bad, but it does point to the importance of being careful with how change is applied. This article will present the top five mistakes to avoid when maintenance costs must be reduced, as identified by the USGA Green Section staff.

1. FAILING TO ADDRESS INFRASTRUCTURE

Infrastructure includes the equipment inventory, maintenance facility, staffing, irrigation system, drainage network, and golf course architecture (or design features). In short, the maintenance infrastructure is the behind-the-scenes support that facilitates routine, day-to-day maintenance. It is easy to understand that the amount of equipment and staff will directly impact what can be achieved on the golf course. Architectural features also impact the maintenance program and costs, which is sometimes overlooked by golfers. For instance, maintaining steep bunker banks requires more staff and equipment than does the care of softer terrain and design features. The



Time spent raising low irrigation heads will improve coverage uniformity and help maximize life expectancy of the irrigation system.



A properly equipped maintenance complex accommodates safe and efficient servicing of equipment, which improves performance and life expectancy.



A maintenance complex that doesn't provide for adequate storage of equipment is compromising overall maintenance efficiency as well as jeopardizing the life expectancy of the equipment fleet.

decision must be made to either spend the resources to properly care for the difficult-to-maintain area (possibly at the expense of other areas of the course) or alter the area to conserve resources that might be better used elsewhere. The same can be applied to irrigation or drainage limitations that force the need for more staff. Often, even when more staff is added to counter infrastructure limitations, the end product will remain compromised, as will budget efficiency. Clearly, a solid infrastructure will reduce maintenance costs and allow what is being invested to go further.

Proper upkeep, replacement, and updating of golf course infrastructure will maximize life expectancy. Equipment must be properly maintained to produce good results, and the same applies to the irrigation system, drainage network, and maintenance complex. Sharp mower blades, for example, increase fuel efficiency while also improving turf quality and playability. A straightforward need, such as keeping irrigation heads level with the surface, can significantly improve the uniformity

of the irrigation pattern. Sprinklers frequently slip below the surface over time, so regular maintenance is needed to correct this and ensure optimum irrigation efficiency. Likewise, proper upkeep of the maintenance complex will improve safety and efficiency. In summary, it is very important for the maintenance infrastructure to be in

sync with, and support, desired conditioning and available funding.

2. CUTTING THE MOST EXPERIENCED OR HIGHER-PAID STAFF

Staff salaries, wages, and benefits often comprise 55 to 70 percent of a golf course maintenance budget. This



The value of experience is often underestimated when it comes time to reduce the budget. When cost savings are necessary, carefully consider the many ways experienced staff members contribute to the success of the golf facility.

makes staffing an inevitable target when budget reductions are needed. It might be suggested that cutting one assistant superintendent or mechanic, especially when there is more than one, is equivalent to several less-skilled employees. In fact, this is occasionally applied to the superintendent. The rationale is often that if the superintendent is let go and an assistant superintendent is promoted, then the needed budget reduction will be achieved and, since all other components in the budget are left unchanged, the end product should be unchanged. Wrong! This suggests that experience offers little or no value. Would you be as comfortable with a less-experienced surgeon, even when all licensing and educational requirements have been met? Unfortunately, experience is often undervalued and laid aside for what superficially appears to be a quick and easy fix.

Laying off full-time employees during the winter can be a cost-saving strategy, but this too will compromise the end product. Less labor means important winter projects may not get done. A winning team is commonly a



When changes are necessary to reduce the operating budget, be sure to communicate the changes with players. Changes are not necessarily bad, but failing to communicate them is.

mix of experienced veterans combined with the youthful enthusiasm of new staff members. While reducing the budget prompts careful review of staff levels, be sure to consider what is needed to achieve the desired product, and do not underestimate the value

of experience. As many golf facilities have learned the hard way, rookie mistakes by inexperienced staff on the golf course can be very costly to fix.

3. FAILING TO COMMUNICATE CHANGES

As previously stated, reducing the budget will likely change the end product. Change is not necessarily bad, but failing to communicate it is. Despite change being a reality of life, it is natural to resist. When funding (or lack thereof) necessitates change, communication will have a big impact on how it is received by players. The superintendent is usually the mastermind behind specific changes in the maintenance program to cut costs. The details of these changes, along with the short- and long-term impacts on course conditioning, should be explained and approved by appropriate decision makers. Recognizing that staff in the golf shop has the most access to players, make sure golf shop staff understands the details of the change being made and why it is a necessary part of reducing costs. Even when the board of directors, green



Changes brought on by needed cost reductions should be carefully monitored so that the impact on turf health and playability can be accurately communicated to decision makers and players.



Maintaining the golf course on the dry side will improve turf health, dependability, and playability.

committee, ownership, and staff understand the specifics of “what, when, and why,” golfers won’t unless they are told. Start communicating before budget adjustments are applied and change on the golf course becomes evident. Communication should be detailed and accentuate the positive.

4. CUTTING BACK ON ESSENTIAL AGRONOMIC PROGRAMS

To provide healthy, dependable golf turf, all essential agronomic programs should be continued, even when cost cutting is necessary. Forced budget reductions should instead be applied to secondary practices. Core aeration and topdressing of putting surfaces are good examples of what should not be cut back. If soil physical analysis and past performance of the greens dictate the need for three core aerations every year, this need will not change simply because cost savings are needed. If core aeration or sand topdressing is suspended or reduced, organic matter can accumulate, which will hold moisture and compromise soil physical properties. The greens then become soft underfoot while being more prone to disease and pest activity. Pulling back on anything that directly impacts water management is a mistake that will set the stage for compromised dependability, especially during harsh weather. There is no question that the

short-term elimination of core aeration to appease an outing will facilitate some level of increased income. However, such shortsightedness, if it becomes a trend, will eventually cost significantly more than the income from the outing. Written maintenance standards provide the best means of avoiding the mistake of cutting back essential agronomic programs.

5. PLACING AESTHETICS ABOVE PLAYABILITY

A golf course is maintained to play the game of golf. It is not a park, playground, or botanical garden. Uniformly emerald green turf is not only unnecessary for playing the game, it will actually increase

maintenance costs by compromising turf health and playability. Certainly, it is possible to kill turfgrass by withholding irrigation at the wrong time, but too little water is not nearly as problematic as too much water. Turf health, turf dependability, maintenance costs, and playability are threatened when over-watering to achieve the color green. It is about turf health and course playability, not the color green.

CONCLUSION

It is understood that there can be situations that mandate cost reductions. Yet, since it is the golf course that anchors nearly every golf operation, it is the golf course that must remain playable with healthy, dependable turf if the facility is to be successful. Avoiding the mistakes discussed in this article will help achieve this objective both now and long into the future.

USEFUL RESOURCES

[The Economy and Golf Course Maintenance](#)

[The Building Blocks of a Solid Maintenance Program](#)

[Setting Standards](#)

[The Ten Most Common Green Committee Mistakes](#)

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Core aeration is not always popular with golfers, but it is an essential component of a successful maintenance program. Essential agronomic practices should not be reduced or eliminated to achieve budget savings.