

The Golf Course Superintendent's Role in the Economic Squeeze

by CHARLES G. BASKIN, Superintendent, Country Club of Waterbury, Conn.
President, Golf Course Superintendents Association of America

The entire golf industry is being dramatically affected by the world's economic crisis. All phases of golf course operations are facing serious problems which are placing severe strains on the ability of the golf courses to survive.

Club management at all levels must be constantly alert and give top priority to the financial stability of the club. The golf course superintendent is a vital ingredient in the club's planning and management as we move through these troubled times. It is his responsibility to manage the golf course maintenance operation within the financial limits, as defined by the club's Board of Directors.

Let us look at a few of the many areas where the superintendent's role is of increased importance during this economic squeeze.

THE BUDGET

One very important area in which the club must utilize the knowledge of the superintendent is in the establishment of an operating budget.

The golf course superintendent is responsible for developing the budgets for all the departments he manages. The superintendent usually submits the golf course budget to the green committee and ultimately to the club's Board of Directors for approval.

The budget, which shows the allocation of the club's financial resources, should be based upon the end results that are desired by the club within their financial resources. The budget should take into consideration: the club's needs, problems to be solved, desired level of maintenance and anticipated revenues.

Most likely, there are several improvements that are desired by the club but due to financial limitations, not all can be accomplished during any one fiscal year. Projects should be given a priority rating and encompassed in the club's long range plans.

The superintendent must have all the necessary statistical information to properly develop and present his budget. He should have the supporting data that will properly relate to current economic conditions. This information must be transmitted to club officials who will be establishing club policies and giving final budgetary approval. After the budget has been approved, it is the superintendent's responsibility to develop a maintenance and project

program to accomplish the club's goals within his budget's financial limits. Once the budget is adopted, the superintendent should keep the club informed as to the status of projects and normal maintenance and the effects of the economic conditions upon the budget and club plans.

While on the subject of budgets, knowledgeable club officials realize that if the level of maintenance is to remain the same, upward adjustments in the "double digit" area are required. On the other hand, if the club does not wish to raise the budget sufficiently to reflect the current economy, then club officials must assume responsibility for reducing its level of maintenance and corresponding member services.

Clubs are facing tough decisions as to whether to expand services, remain at the same level, or even reduce services in view of the current economic conditions. There are no easy answers.

FERTILIZERS AND CHEMICALS

Fertilizers are one of the basic supplies needed to maintain a golf course, and presently we are facing serious problems. The fertilizer picture is grim due to:

1. Skyrocketing prices which have risen over 300 per cent for some fertilizers recently.
2. Shortages caused by limited supplies coupled by increased demands.
3. Government intervention is possible with controls being placed on non-farm use.

The situation is constantly changing and the superintendent must keep abreast of the latest developments in order that he provide the best possible management.

Most golf course superintendents have established a fertilizer management program; i.e., a planned program having a built-in flexibility to permit on-the-spot adjustments when and if they become necessary for turfgrass production. The program takes many factors into consideration, including:

1. Species of grass.
2. Grass usage.
3. Soil test results.
4. Physical conditions of soil.
5. Chemical properties of soil.
6. Length of growing season.
7. Weather



Providing the best he can . . .

8. Types of fertilizer available.
9. Fertilizer costs.
10. Budget.
11. Labor availability and cost.
12. General management program.

It has been said, "Don't guess, soil test." Soil testing is an integral part of a fertilizer management program. Usually it is only necessary to soil test once every three years, unless one is on a strong soil corrective program. The results of the soil tests should only be part of the total information necessary for the establishment of a good fertilizer program.

The determination of the proper rate of application is very important. If one were to plot on a graph the plant response versus the rate of fertilizer application, one would find that many times the rate of application being presently used is on the flattened out portion of the curve. Reductions in fertilizer rates might not significantly reduce plant response.

I would like to suggest that superintendents experiment with a reduction, try 10 per cent, and see if there is a significant change in plant response. If a 10 per cent reduction doesn't significantly affect the plant, try 15 per cent. Keep reducing your rates until you notice a detrimental change in the plant, then increase your rate slightly.

Some of the first signs will be a reduced rate

of growth and a decrease in plant color. A reduced rate of growth will also decrease the plant's ability to recover from traffic and wear marks will start to appear. Certain diseases are more prevalent under reduced fertilization while the reverse is true for other diseases.

The timing of fertilizer applications is even more critical in order that the plant can make maximum use of the applied fertilizer. Accurate application methods are very important. This means good equipment, proper calibration, well-trained crews and correct application procedures. Constant checks should be made while the fertilizer is being applied to ensure accurate applications.

Reducing the amount of thatch will increase the amount of fertilizer available to the living plant.

Increasing the height of cut slightly will help make the plant better able to take in fertilizer. This decision presents an adverse situation for the golfer and should only be a last resort consideration.

Water has a leaching effect on fertilizers. Therefore the conservative use of water in irrigation will allow more plant usage of the fertilizer applied.

THE GOVERNMENT

Government, at both the state and federal levels, is playing an ever increasing role with the



with what he has to work with.

maintenance programs on our golf courses. Government intervention is having its effect on just about everything we do, from the chemicals we use, the design of our equipment to our management practices. These governmental actions are having significant economic effects on our industry.

Governments have banned and restricted production of several chemicals used on the golf course. They are continuing their investigations.

For example, mercury-based chemicals, which have had a record of safe use on our golf courses as a broad spectrum fungicide are now banned or restricted in several states. The federal government will conclude hearings on mercury this June.

Chlordane, already restricted in some states, is under investigation at the federal level. They will start hearings later this year. Chlordane is a long-lasting insecticide that has been very valuable in the control of turf insects on golf courses for a number of years. There are no comparable products on the market.

The Williams-Steiger Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 (OSHA) adopts standards, and among other methods for accomplishing compliance, conducts inspections of workplaces, including golf courses, to determine whether standards are being met.

For many clubs, the cost for compliance has been very high. The cost if one is found in violation is very high. OSHA officials place the country club industry in the high risk category for fire and a medium risk for accident.

While many of the government's actions have served as useful instruments in upgrading the standards of our industry, others have had questionable value. In any case, the golf course superintendent has the added responsibility of keeping informed on all such regulations and he must make adjustments in his managerial techniques in order to continue to operate within the law.

SUMMARY

We are moving through a period of serious economic conditions for golf clubs. Our changing times necessitate a complete review of each operation. The golf course superintendent must keep abreast of all the latest developments. He must constantly strive to improve his managerial techniques by finding new and innovative ways to continue to manage the golf course within the bounds of financial stability.

In the philosophy of the golf course superintendent, today's challenges are today's opportunities. Today the most stimulating opportunity presented to the golf course superintendent is to overcome the many obstacles facing the golf industry.