

# What Do You Do With It All?

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**“WHAT DO YOU DO** with all that money in your budget?”

Too frequently we hear committeemen or club members ask their golf course superintendent that very question. Hearing it strengthens the need to develop realistic budgets, fund the budget properly, and then adopt a hands-off policy when you are tempted to use the money for anything other than maintenance or capital expenditures on the golf course.

## What Are Budgets Supposed To Do?

Budgets should be well defined so that the committees, board of directors, and the members can see exactly what is happening to their money. The budget should have enough itemization to be fairly explicit, and yet not be so detailed that it is cumbersome. Budgets should never be padded. Sometimes, however, budgets seem to be exercises in setting aside a given sum of money for maintenance or capital items and then taking it back at some later date. This is a sure way of killing incentive for developing good budgets and adhering to them.

## How Big Should a Maintenance Budget Be?

A recent article (April, 1986) published in *The Bull Sheet*, from the Midwest Association of Golf Course Superintendents, of the greater Chicago area, was entitled, “If I Only Had A Half-Million-Dollar Budget.” It appears that clubs in the Chicago area that want the best conditions have budgets in the range of from \$400,000 to \$500,000. These clubs normally have 13 to 16



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employees during the growing season and five to six full-time during the winter. Labor costs amount to approximately 60 percent of the total budget.

Budgets for Pacific Northwest clubs that want better conditions, such as those in Chicago, normally run well under \$400,000. Let us not lose sight of the fact also that golf clubs located in the far west — Arizona, California, Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia — maintain golf courses for play 12 months of the year. We are talking of budgets for normal 18-hole private clubs. Nevertheless, it is not unusual to hear of budgets running from

\$750,000 to \$1 million or more for resort courses in the sunbelt area.

Now here we go comparing budgets when one of my cardinal rules is never to compare golf courses or budgets. It all boils down to what one wants and what one is willing to pay for.

## What Happens To These Budgets?

**1. Putting greens.** They are mowed generally on a daily basis, aerified two to six times per year, verticut 10 to 30 times per year, and watered and fertilized as required. Our greens receive from eight to 15 fungicide applications a year, and frequently one to two insecticide applications. Occasional weed sprays are required. The greens are topdressed from four to 12 times annually.

These are pretty much standard practices. However, when golfers ask for extremely fast greens, the cost of labor goes up dramatically. The greens must frequently be double-cut. Irrigation is reduced, which usually calls for a significant increase in hand syringing. There is usually an increase in fungicides, because weakened turfgrasses are more susceptible to disease, and low cutting will definitely predispose putting green grasses to more diseases.

**2. Tees.** Good quality tees require about 1/2 to 2/3 of the maintenance required for putting greens. Nearly every golf course has had its tees remodeled in recent years. Sometimes they're enlarged or the soils or grasses are changed, but frequently they are re-designed and some new tees are added. Shorter, more frequent mowing, increased overseeding, fertilization, and increased aerification all cost money.



*(Above) How BIG should a maintenance budget be?*

*(Left) I have never met a club member who likes aeration!*

**3. Fairways and roughs.** Most fairways are mowed at least three days a week, in many instances with triplex mowers and with clippings removed. Roughs are mowed a minimum of once each week. Fairways are aerified one to five times a year and fertilized two to four times annually; one to two weed sprays, possibly one insecticidal spray, and sometimes fungicides are required.

Overseeding of all areas, including greens, tees, and fairways, can be a considerable expense, but many golf courses do it.

Expectations of low-handicap golfers significantly increase costs. The better golfers prefer tight lies, which calls for close and frequent fairway mowing. Large sums of money are spent each year to convert fairways to bentgrass, which thrives under a close cut and still retains good grass density, but this is only the tip of the iceberg. Most of our golf course fairways were either rough when they were constructed, or buried wood has decayed, stump holes have settled, or burrowing animals have created all sorts of surface irregularities. It is virtually impossible to mow such fairways to a height of 1/2-inch or less. To smooth them, expensive sod lifting or topdressing must be scheduled. This is time-consuming, extremely expensive, and disruptive to play.

This budget could go on to include drainage projects, irrigation improvements, or landscaping. It is endless.

### **Maintenance vs. Capital Budgets**

We should definitely separate all maintenance costs from capital improvements and adhere strongly to these principles. If it is obvious that there is additional money in the maintenance budget after all the good things are done, then of course use it for capital investment. Usually, however, it is the other way around; we steal from maintenance for capital projects. In other words, the maintenance budget should be sacred, and not touched unless there is an extreme emergency.

It has been rumored that a private club recently had a shortfall of \$160,000. The membership was assessed \$100,000 and \$60,000 was taken from the maintenance budget. Well, this worked for one year. Then the following year there was a shortfall of only \$40,000, which was then promptly removed from the maintenance budget. In the meantime, the golf course was falling behind, salaries and wages were hurting, and the superintendent resigned. He did the smart thing. There is no way he could do or keep his job with the golf course constantly being shorted.

Both short-range and long-range planning are extremely important to help cover capital items such as irrigation systems, major drainage systems and replacing expensive equipment required for taking proper care of our golf courses.

### **Helpful Committeemen and Members**

Well-meaning committees, boards of directors, or influential club members frequently interject their views and authority on matters of golf course maintenance. These views, unfortunately, are not always based on sound agronomics. Grave errors cost tremendous amounts of money and inconvenience to the membership. With respect to aerification, topdressing, watering and mowing, fertilization, etc., these decisions should be left in the hands of the professionally qualified golf course superintendent. I have never met a member of a club who likes to see his golf course aerified because of the mess and inconvenience it causes. In order to overcome the mess, aerifier cores are frequently removed entirely with sweepers at great expense to maintenance. Due to the inconvenience and increased cost, golf course fairways are not aerified as frequently as they should be. This can result in loss of soil drainage, increased compaction, and eventually deterioration of turfgrasses. Topdressing of putting greens is essential to promote dry surfaces, firm greens, and true putting. Failure to carry out good topdressing

programs can result in severe loss of quality greens, frequently resulting in rebuilding or renovation at great cost and inconvenience.

The list of problems caused by well-meaning and helpful members could go on and on, but golf clubs should be very careful about accepting advice and recommendations except from totally qualified people.

### **You Get What You Pay For**

Considering the golf course maintenance department, such things as loyalty, care, consideration, and productivity cost money. Your golf course superintendent and his assistant should be encouraged to participate in local, state, regional, and national turfgrass meetings where scientific or technical information is discussed. These are important means of keeping current both scientifically and legally, and for carrying out best management practices. I am embarrassed to learn that some golf course superintendents have to pay their own way to some of these meetings where their employer is the benefactor.

Salaries and wages should be comparable with other industries in the area to attract qualified people who will stay on the job. It costs money to train new employees, to say nothing of the damage they may cause from lack of knowledge.

Good quality superintendents and employees can be attracted if we will provide certain basic benefits, which include paid vacation and participation in medical and retirement programs. The superintendent, the assistant, and long-term employees frequently have nothing more to look forward to at the end of their careers except their last paycheck and social security.

The bottom line is that we usually get what we pay for, and if we provide adequate budgets, we can make better comparisons between golf courses. If most golfers would understand that you get what you pay for, the job of the green committee and the golf course superintendent would be much easier.