

Putting the Cart Before the Horse

The folly of rebuilding a clubhouse before upgrading an old irrigation system.

BY BOB VAVREK

Extensive renovation or complete reconstruction of old clubhouses has been the trend among many private and public courses across the region over the past 10 to 15 years. No doubt, plumbing, kitchen, bathroom, and other antiquated facilities need to be updated to compete with nearby modern courses built during the recent golf boom.

The hope is that a new clubhouse will keep current members content and attract additional members. New members maintain cash flow provided by monthly dues and initiation fees. However, the \$5-million to \$15-million price tag that accompanies a major building reconstruction sometimes leaves the membership mired in a financial quagmire for many years. New clubhouses that are intended to attract new members may initially cause the club to lose some of the older members who believe they will not receive adequate long-term benefits from what will likely be a considerable assessment. The unfortunate side effect from many clubhouse construction projects is a five-year, or longer, freeze on funding for important golf course improvements.

Unfortunately, most courses that have neglected the clubhouse over the years have also neglected other costly, but important, items such as the maintenance facility and irrigation system. You can bet that most of the new members who join a club during the membership drives that follow clubhouse reconstruction will have expectations regarding course conditioning about as high as the price tag of the clubhouse.

Reasonable as well as unreasonable expectations for firm, fast greens for day-to-day play; firm, uniform fairways; and firm, consistent bunker conditions will be nearly impossible to provide using a 30- to 40-year-old irrigation system that is sorely in need of replacement. Single-row patterns of high-output sprinklers along fairways and irrigation around greens provided by five or six sprinklers that cannot be controlled individually result in over-watered turf. Old controllers that have been refurbished umpteen times and old, leaky pipes make it difficult, if not impossible, to apply precise, uniform amounts of water to playing surfaces. The bottom line is that golfer expectations and demands increase, while the ability of an old watering system to keep the turf firm and dry decreases.

It may be possible to consolidate clubhouse renovation and irrigation into a single project, but then you risk the proposal being voted down due to the high cost of the clubhouse. Furthermore, estimating the cost of a new irrigation system is a relatively straightforward and accurate procedure. On the other hand, clubhouse renovations are notorious for going over budget. In fact, a number of courses across the region could have easily installed state-of-the-art irrigation systems with no more than the amount of money that exceeded the original anticipated cost of a complete clubhouse renovation.

It makes little sense to undertake significant clubhouse renovation first and then place long-overdue irrigation system upgrades on the back burner for

another five to ten years. Arguments will always be made that it is much easier to sell a new clubhouse to a membership than a new irrigation system, despite the greater cost of the former. You cannot sit on, walk through, or have your daughter's wedding on a new irrigation system. Some members, particularly non-golfers, will find it difficult to comprehend the considerable long-term benefits of burying a million dollars or so into the ground. On the other hand, a crystal chandelier and sterling silver candelabra won't make the greens any firmer. New Persian carpets won't stop major irrigation leaks from occurring the night before the club championship. You won't realize an extra five or ten yards of roll down firm fairways because of a fieldstone fireplace.

When all is said and done, the golf club exists because of the golf course. Face it, without the golf course the clubhouse is little more than an expensive restaurant and party center that quite often operates in the red. Few, if any, avid golfers make their decision regarding which facility to join based on the square footage of the clubhouse. The irrigation system has a major impact on the quality of playing conditions — so much of an impact that it never makes sense to put the cart before the horse.

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