

Master Plans: The Do's and Don'ts for Membership Approval

Communication is everything.

BY TODD RAISCH

What is it they say about real estate? The keys to success are location, location, and location. Similarly, there are three keys to any successful membership vote. They are *good communication*, *good communication*, and *good communication*.

Just in the last few years I've been a part of three such votes: a successful golf course master plan, a successful facility master plan, and a painful failure, a new irrigation proposal that was shot down by an overwhelming majority of the membership. Communication played a huge role in the approvals and defeat. This article will share with you some of the lessons I learned the hard way so that your future plans are successful the first time around.

I'm going to relate my experiences in chronological order, so let's start with the failed irrigation system.

I was somewhat surprised one evening in the summer of 1999 when a casual conversation I had with my chairman turned into his strong support for a new irrigation system. Just prior to a Board meeting he told me the Board would be discussing long-term capital requirements that night, and he asked me what one capital item would be the most necessary over the next three to five years. My immediate response was that we needed a new irrigation system. He asked why, so I explained the basics of our single-row system and how the distribution efficiency would be greatly enhanced by a three- or five-row



Watching sprinklers function does not tell the complete story. More evaluation, such as using catchment tests, is necessary to accurately characterize performance.



A new maintenance building represents a significant expense and can be difficult to justify. The golfers need to understand the deficiencies of the existing facilities and the potential repercussions if nothing is done to resolve the situation.

system. By the time I had arrived at the office the next morning, an email had arrived saying that the Board had given its approval for the design of a new system, and that we now had to sell the need to the membership for a February 2000 vote and a fall 2000 installation.

I quickly researched designers and then asked Jim Barrett to join our team. He recommended a comparison letter from him describing the inadequacies of the current system and how a new system would better suit our needs. This turned out to be the first of several mistakes. We all assumed that since the membership had never voted down any major assessment, we were assured of membership approval and only a minimum of information filtered down to the members. The letter from Mr. Barrett was used only as a tool to further convince the Board of the need for a new system. The membership never saw any outside consultants' recommendations.

We did, however, draft a two-page letter that detailed all of the reasons why a new system was necessary. It carefully explained all the reasons for our proposal and included several color photos to give it a professional look. At this point we felt confident of the vote. Unfortunately, most members were unable to get past the first sentence of our letter. It read:

"Based on the recommendation of the Greens and Grounds Committee, the Board of Directors has approved the installation of a new state-of-the-art irrigation system." Due to our poor choice of words, the proposal was dead the day this letter arrived in the mailboxes of our members. The backlash from our membership was incredible! "Who do they think they are? They can't approve a project with such large financial implications. Only the members can approve such a request." Despite several letters to clarify the Board's position, we were slaughtered

at the polls. We received just 41% of the vote. If only we had taken the time to communicate correctly at the outset . . .

Nonetheless, I wasn't ready to give up the fight. The year 2000 brought with it a new chairman for me, and he believed strongly in the need for the new system. Recognizing the previous problems with respect to communicating with the membership, we set up four focus group meetings in 2000 to do three things: explain the inherent need for the system, discuss the financial implications, and allow the membership to ask questions and comment on the proposal. This last part was clearly the most important. The membership made it clear that the inherent need for the system was not nearly as big an issue to them as was how the proposal was presented to them, especially since they were never provided the opportunity to give any feedback. After much positive feedback from the focus groups, we

thought we were ready to go forward, but some other events at the club forced us to put the irrigation system on the back burner.

At the same time as the irrigation debacle, the Board had begun looking at other issues on the course and approved the development of a master plan for the entire golf course.

We hired noted golf course architect Gil Hanse, and he began his work immediately. At the same time we sat

Projects.” A few items were taken out of the plan, most notably the bunker restoration, which would now be financed over time from the operating budget instead of all at once by an assessment. The original \$2.1 million price tag was down to \$1 million, and the vote passed by a huge majority.

Shortly after the approval of the golf course master plan, my chairman, who had orchestrated the golf course vote, became president and was now evaluat-

conditions came out. This was a stroke of genius. The firm put together a report that described all of the infrastructure problems. They described how the kitchen floor was about to fall into the basement, how the maintenance facility was unable to support our needs, etc., etc.

Following that, the consulting firm and the Board started cranking. What they came up with was nothing short of spectacular. Although the Board

What may be an obvious need to the professional turf manager may require a great deal of explanation to the average golfer. In times of drought, increased water storage capacity can make a big difference.



down with four groups of 25 members each to discuss what they would like to see done on the golf course. We took down every comment and then asked Gil to incorporate the ideas he thought necessary. Obviously, we were confident that Gil would only include what he felt was appropriate, but involving the membership in the process went a long way toward the eventual approval of the program. Following Gil's final recommendations, every member was given a color copy of Gil's plan.

The next step was the town hall meeting. The president provided the background, the treasurer talked about finances, and Gil discussed the plan. Finally, and most importantly, we gave the members the time to have their say. One recurring comment was that the cost of the project was more than they wanted to pay for. Based on this and other comments, the Board then came out with its "Board Recommended

ing other needs for the club. Obviously, we needed to close the deal on the irrigation system, but we also had several infrastructure problems. Two of the five grounds buildings were on the verge of falling down, the clubhouse was neither functional nor up-to-date in décor, technology, or storage. The entrance road also needed a major upgrade. Knowing that good communication was the key to our previous success, the president quickly mobilized his troops and began a PR blitz that included a deluge of information for the membership.

First was the hiring of a clubhouse consultant firm. They put together a detailed survey, requesting preferences on everything imaginable concerning the clubhouse, greens and grounds complex, irrigation system, and financing.

While we were tabulating the results of the survey, the report on existing

never expected to do all of the projects, letting out that the proposed plan would cost in excess of \$23 million actually worked to the Board's advantage. When the Board came in with a more reasonable proposal, they were everyone's heroes.

The next step was a series of focus group meetings. Again, four groups of 25 were invited to attend specific meetings divided up by age. The president served as MC of the event and introduced several speakers, the first of whom was the president of the consulting company. He covered the results of the survey, the existing conditions report, their vision for our future, and finally a list of the Board-recommended projects. Those projects totaled \$7 million out of the original \$23 million.

Next came the chairman of the Greens and Grounds Committee. Something he said during those meetings will always stick with me. He very

forcefully stated that no one in the room outside of the superintendent and David Oatis of the USGA has the technical knowledge to determine whether we need another system or not, and whether it would be three or five rows, Rain Bird or Toro, etc. I had been expecting plenty of questions with regard to these types of things, but they never came up, and I believe that his opening statements diffused a lot of that. My chairman then introduced David Oatis, who gave a 20-minute tutorial titled "Irrigation 101." Now I could have easily given this presentation, and we actually talked about my doing it. However, having an impartial outsider recommend it, especially with the initials USGA on his lapel, lent a level of comfort to the membership that a superintendent cannot provide.

Finally, David Oatis, the president of the consulting firm, the treasurer, and I sat up front for a Q&A session. I quickly became very confident when there seemed to be more comments than questions. It appeared that our message had gotten through, because many of the comments were about why we were not doing more.

Following the Q&A session, another survey was passed out to the focus group participants. Although the results looked good, we were not taking any chances with the irrigation system.

Between the focus group meetings in July of 2003 and the final vote in September of 2003, my chairman and I hosted an irrigation night on the golf course. I turned on the sprinklers and showed the limitations of the current system. This won over several more skeptics. Seeing something firsthand versus taking someone's word for it can be very convincing.

At this point the Board had a decision to make: how to structure the vote. Prior to the focus groups, the plan had been to have one up-or-down vote on all of the projects. This now seemed risky, since we could potentially lose everything, including the irrigation system, which polling told us had over-

whelming support. Ultimately, projects were packaged. The irrigation system was put together with the three new grounds buildings. The clubhouse renovation was put together with the entrance road renovation and a club generator.

There was also one final question on the ballot. Without tying the hands of future Boards, members were asked if there was a sense of resolution with regard to whether or not future Boards should continue with the implementation of the remaining elements of the overall master plan.

In the end, it really was a long process — a lot of meetings, letters, and presentations. However, it paid off. The clubhouse projects passed at 82 percent approval, while the irrigation and grounds buildings obtained 87% approval. Even the continuation of the master plan by future Boards passed by a 79 percent approval rate.

What made the difference between this overwhelming success and the

previous failure? In a word, communication. The process starts with an idea that is developed into a sound, well-grounded plan to solve a problem or improve the facility. The formulation of the plan can be aided considerably through the use of consultants and impartial third parties. The same consultants who help formulate the plan can then help explain the need for and the intricacies of it to the membership. The steps we took to educate and inform the membership helped them through the initial shock and aggravation at the expense required for the projects, and it allowed the sound logic of the plan to sell itself. The best plan in the world is of little value if it never gets implemented. Education can allay many fears, so take the time to thoroughly communicate your message to the golfers.

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Golfers who don't see bunker washouts because they are repaired quickly may not fully understand the need for a bunker renovation project.