

Get Projects on the Right Track

Selling a major capital project for a golf course is never easy, but a few common-sense guidelines can encourage approval and success.

BY DARIN BEVARD



Upgrades to golf courses and surrounding facilities have been occurring since the beginning of golf. Construction of new golf courses has slowed, but course officials at older golf courses have stepped up renovations, oftentimes to compete with the new facilities that have emerged in their area. With a golf market that is flat or, some say, shrinking, maintaining quality and value is a must. New tech-

nology, development of better grasses and need for improved practice areas help fuel the renovation trend. Renovation of buildings and grounds is especially prevalent at private clubs, but many older daily-fee and municipal golf courses also are participating in the renovation trend. Golf courses overall are becoming more family friendly facilities that include such amenities as fitness centers and children's clubs.

Replacement of the entire irrigation system can improve water use efficiency. This allows better conditions to be maintained, but costs for new systems can approach \$2 million. Simply upgrading heads may help the existing system, but it is not a substitute for replacement of an aging system.

Unless yours is one of those very special golf courses, attracting people to your facility requires upgrades to the golf course and surrounding facilities to stay current with industry trends. Needs must be prioritized to get the most overall benefit for the money spent.

Gaining approval for major renovations takes careful planning. Although some of the best-planned renovations get rejected for various reasons (usually cost or inconvenience), there are several key thoughts to keep in mind that will encourage approval of future projects. Communication is the key to keep everyone who is affected involved in the process.

What is the expected outcome? Projects should focus on areas that truly need improvement, and this may not be just the golf course. Clubhouse and grounds also need to be upgraded periodically. Although clubhouse renovation may be sacrilegious to the pure golfer, larger projects that address multiple areas of the facility can garner greater support, even though they come at a greater cost. Ultimately, a greater benefit for the future of the whole facility may be realized. For example, if the bunkers are renovated on the golf course as part of an overall project that also addresses the pool or tennis courts, greater numbers of members will be interested. This does not guarantee approval, but it can help.

People like to be involved with and informed about the planning process, even if it is only at a peripheral level. Town meeting type settings provide a great opportunity to exchange information and encourage feedback. These meetings can prevent secondhand, wrong information from derailing a project. USGA agronomists sometimes participate in membership or even municipal council meetings to discuss the pros and cons of a major renovation. This type of third-party feedback is usually very helpful and can provide information about the needs of the course in question as well as trends at other facilities. General cost and financing of the project can be discussed. It is natural for people to know what a project will cost them. Reciprocal privileges at other golf courses should be unveiled if the golf course will be closed. People want to know where they will play golf if the course is closed for renovation.



When golf course renovations are considered, the golf course superintendent can provide useful information.

PROVIDE LOTS OF HONEST INFORMATION

As mentioned in the introduction, communication is extremely important. In some instances, projects are thought out and planned behind closed doors, with very little information flowing to other stakeholders who will be affected at the golf course. This can establish a feeling that a major project is being shoved down the throat of the membership. Explaining why a project is needed and what the benefits are to each segment of the membership/customer base is critical. What areas of the facility will be impacted?

NEVER SELL A BAND-AID PROGRAM AS A RENOVATION

One of the biggest mistakes that any golf course can make is selling a quick-fix program as a renovation. This occurs frequently, especially at private clubs. For example, old irrigation heads are replaced with new irrigation heads, but nothing is done to address an aging pump station or aging pipes in the ground. Installing new

heads will help with an irrigation system, but pumping capacity and pipe restrictions can prevent a meaningful agronomic improvement. Adding sand to bunkers to dress them up, also referred to as capping, and announcing that bad bunkers are now fixed, is another example. The bunkers look pretty for the short term, but if drainage problems and architecture of bunkers are not also addressed, they return to their old form with contaminated sand and poor drainage.

Why is the Band-Aid fix a problem? Quick fixes that also are costly are often mistaken for renovations as in, "Why do we need to renovate our bunkers? We just spent \$60,000 renovating them two years ago." No, you did not renovate them two years ago; you implemented a quick fix that really didn't fix foundational problems. When quick fixes are not clearly stated as such, actual renovations are hindered because the perception is that the area in question has already been renovated, and it does not need to be dealt with again for another 10 years.

DO IT ONCE; DO IT RIGHT

Nothing dooms future renovation projects more than a botched project from the past. Selling a project as a major improvement for your golf course only to have poor results will make it very difficult, if not impossible, to get future projects approved. When developing plans for a project, you must start with a budget that provides for the best possible outcome to be achieved. If adjustments are needed, adjust down from the ideal. Starting with a budget that allows for the minimum to be achieved and then cutting it jeopardizes the success of the project. For example, if you are regrassing greens, do not provide a price tag that doesn't include the cost for fumigation. Without fumigation, weed contamination and off-type grasses can quickly invade the turfgrass stand.

ESTABLISH A REASONABLE TIMELINE

For golf course renovations, the superintendent should be consulted to establish a reasonable

Putting green regrassing requires the golf course to be closed. Providing a reasonable timeline for reopening is critical for having a successful project. Reciprocal playing privileges at other golf courses can make the inconvenience easier to tolerate.





Capping bunkers with new, white sand can lead golfers to believe that bunkers have been renovated, when in fact it provides a temporary aesthetic fix at best. This technique does nothing to address the underlying problems that led to sand contamination in the first place.

time frame for the project and the reopening date. This is extremely important! For a clubhouse or pool renovation, regardless of the scheduled opening date, the actual opening date is black and white because it is clear when construction is completed. Reopening the golf course involves a lot more gray area. Physical renovations are completed months before the golf course is ready to reopen, but the grass needs time to grow and mature. The average observer sees regular maintenance being performed and lush green grass. The golf course *looks* ready to open, but it is not. Theoretically, the golf course can be reopened anytime, but reopening the golf course, especially greens, before they are ready to receive regular traffic, can be devastating and create a negative perception about the renovation.

Establishment of timelines that can be met only under a best-case scenario can create problems. When projects take longer than advertised and create greater inconvenience, future projects suffer. Articulating an average timeline that provides some flexibility and contingency for the worst-case scenario is the best approach. The tentative "reopening" date should be set with reasonable expectations in mind. If weather, construction schedules, etc. allow an earlier opening date, everyone is a hero. When an unreasonable opening date is put forward to sell a project (and ultimately not met, because it cannot be!), everyone is upset and finger pointing begins.

PROVIDE A REASONABLE BUDGET

Lowballing the cost of a project pulls together everything mentioned above. There are very few shortcuts that allow for a high-quality product to be produced, and one bad project can doom future ones. Creative financing options can be explored to fund any project, but do not promise champagne on a beer budget. Enough people will realize that a projected budget does not match the projected results. This creates a bad atmosphere to obtain approval for a project, as people come to the conclusion that the project will cost more than projected or the results will be far less than desired. Do it once; do it

right. Never forget that the success or failure of any project dictates perceptions about future projects.

Additionally, do not state that a renovation project will save money in regular maintenance in the long run, unless you are very sure that it will. Generally, course improvements allow existing maintenance resources to be used more efficiently to provide better conditions. Budget reductions do not usually occur after a renovation, but the intangibles of better conditions and more enjoyment for the customer must also be accounted for when discussing costs. These intangibles should attract new members and customers who ultimately help the bottom line.

If you want your project to move forward and be successful, the key is honest, straightforward communication regarding the scope of work, inconvenience to the customer, ultimate cost, and the quality of the finished product. The best renovations are those where reasonable budgets are matched with reasonable expectations and a reasonable time line for completion is established. Promising to do too much and promising it will cost too little will only lead to disappointment and make approval of future capital projects even more difficult.

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