

The Escalating Cost of Golf Course Maintenance

The costs of maintaining golf courses are increasing rapidly for a variety of reasons.

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Budgets at many private clubs and daily-fee facilities are going down or are at least flat. Raising green fees or attracting new members is proving difficult for reasons too numerous to mention in this article. Overall, revenue for many facilities is also stagnant. Elite clubs that are more able to absorb increasing costs are separating themselves further from the next tier of clubs, placing further pressure on turfgrass managers at clubs and courses that are impacted by changes in the economic landscape. Cost increases are evident throughout golf course maintenance budgets. Several specific areas are discussed below.

LABOR

Labor is the biggest line item in virtually any budget, generally consuming 50% to 70% of a golf course budget. Most golfers want to play on a “well-conditioned golf course” (survey results Golf 20/20, 2005). Labor costs more. Fifteen to 20 years ago, hourly wages at a golf course were superior to those of many competing businesses (fast food, retail, etc.) and were very attractive, especially to high school and college students who didn’t mind rising early and working long hours and weekends. The gap between golf course wages and other work options is far less than in the past, not requiring long days and weekend work. H-2B, a federal program that allows approximately 65,000 immigrant workers to perform seasonal labor on temporary, 10-month visas has helped, but a recent addendum to this law has greatly re-



Golfers prefer to play a well-conditioned golf course. Increasing golfer expectations have led to many renovation/regrassing projects on putting greens to meet golfer expectations and attract new customers and members.



Weather extremes can dramatically impact budgeting. A severe winter that leads to turf loss can create the ultimate Catch-22. Capital beyond the normal budget is needed to repair damage, while at the same time poor turf conditions can reduce revenues.



With fewer golf course maintenance employees, it may require a very early start to the work day, longer days for each employee, and more overtime to prepare the golf course.

duced the number of available workers in this program and is hurting golf courses. Golfers expect near-perfect conditions, and it takes labor to meet these expectations. Having fewer employees means that fewer tasks can be completed daily.

OVERTIME

With fewer workers, each person must work more hours to prepare the golf course. With tight labor and the popularity of morning shotgun events, proper golf course presentation demands overtime, which further aggravates labor costs. But . . .



Every daily task on the golf course requires labor to complete. Finding qualified employees to perform tasks as simple as bunker raking can be difficult with tight budgets and a tight labor pool.

GOLFER EXPECTATIONS

As we have said, golfer expectations continue to increase. Green speed is probably the biggest measuring stick among golf courses, but other areas are also compared. Older grasses/construction on overly treed golf courses make it more costly to maintain top-notch conditions, and sometimes conditions are still less than great. Regrassing/renovation of greens, renovation of bunkers, large-scale tree removal, and total course reconstruction are popular to some degree in all areas of our region. This requires a costly initial investment, but it is easier to meet expectations with new grasses, modern construction, proper drainage, good growing environments, etc. With proper infrastructure, you can have a better golf course with less intense maintenance.

MATERIAL COSTS

Most golf course products (fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides, etc.) are petroleum based, and their cost is increasing. The cost to get these products to the golf course is increasing, too. In fact, fuel costs and fuel surcharges affect delivery costs for virtually everything, including seed, sod, topdressing, etc.,

not to mention the direct cost of fuel needed for the maintenance operation. This will not improve soon.

THE WEATHER

Plan for the worst with respect to the weather. The best way to manage grass in weather extremes is to grow healthy turf. This includes preventative versus curative pesticide sprays, more fertilization, and more aeration and topdressing. Extreme weather destroys the budget, especially if fungicide budgets are generated with benign weather conditions in mind!

The bottom line is that if you spend less, you should expect less. Even if you spend the same amount year after year, your buying power decreases. There are no shortcuts. Superintendents need to be innovative in implementing programs, but there are limits. Rather than trying to compete with every course around you, focus on providing quality on a daily basis at your golf course. Your golf course will never be all things to all people.

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