

The Good, Bad and Ugly — The Green Committee Unveiled

Blocking the “bad” or moving the “ugly” to “good” comes with defining desired conditioning.

BY BOB BRAME

At most golf or country clubs, the green committee is a group of individuals who are charged with overseeing the maintenance of the golf course. Typically, the green committee answers to the board of directors and ultimately to the membership, while the course superintendent is responsible to the green committee. The USGA Green Section publication “A Guide for Green Committee Members,” available on the USGA website, is a resource that all members of a green committee should read ([Link to Green Committee Guide](#)).

For more than 40 years it has been my privilege to work for (as a superintendent) and with (as a USGA agronomist) a variety of green committees. Most committees sincerely try to do a good job for the golfers/members they represent. On the other hand, there have been occurrences of committees or their chairperson making bad decisions that compromise agronomics, economics, and politics. The middle ground between good and bad is ugly. The precarious ugly can be turned to good or bad, depending upon multiple factors like open-mindedness, objectivity, patience, approachability, and availability. As an example, a committee member who ranks trees equal to the turf (ugly) could be educated to better guard turf quality (good) or be lost to the ranks of tree hugging at the expense of turf health/playability (bad). Or, consider the committee member who believes that bunkers should be raked daily. This potentially ugly, precarious position could be turned to good if a committee agreed upon prioritization of maintenance standards and provided funding to make it doable. Conversely, it would be bad if putting surface maintenance suffered as a result of bunker raking, or if daily



This dedicated and open-minded green committee chair went from being a tree hugger to fully supporting selective tree removal as recommended by his course superintendent.



A commitment of time is needed to serve on an active and properly functioning green committee. Occasionally touring specific sites on the course makes it possible for the course superintendent to keep committee members up to date on the maintenance operation.

bunker raking was not properly prioritized and supported by the entire committee. Lessons learned over the years underscore the importance of unveiling the good, bad, and ugly if there is to be sustainability moving forward. Here's how the unveiling can be accomplished.

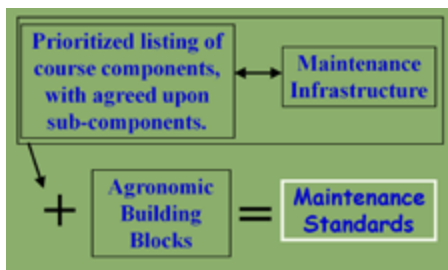
Recognizing that agronomics, economics, and politics are involved in every maintenance decision, it is important for a committee to carefully consider the big picture. There will be times when one of the three elements (agronomics, economics, or politics) mandates a specific course of action. When one of the three clearly dominates, make the call and move forward. The challenge comes when there is a blur, which is a common occurrence, between the three elements, making it difficult or even impossible to sort out. Golf course maintenance can be complex, creating blurs, or confusion may develop when one or more committee members see a particular aspect of

the operation differently. The end result will be fragmentation. The lack of consensus then compromises direction and places the staff in a no-win position. When this situation develops, the committee should default to guarding agronomics above politics and economics. After all, it will be the sound agronomic conditioning of the course that protects the primary asset, while maximizing dependable playability over the long haul.

In addition to guarding agronomic building blocks, the maintenance infrastructure should be in sync with a detailed prioritization of course components. This weave is discussed in the article ["The Economy and Golf Course Maintenance."](#) The process involves the green committee identifying and then prioritizing, with the superintendent's guidance, all applicable components of the maintenance operation. Putting surfaces will be first, but beyond that there will need to be an

in-depth exchange. Some may say that tees are second, while others will say fairways, and so on. The committee should discuss the specifics and establish a complete prioritization of the main components. Under each main component, like greens, collars, tees, fairways, approaches, green surrounds, intermediate rough, primary rough, bunkers, trees, ponds/streams, and flowers/ornamentals, subcomponents will need to be added. The subcomponents will combine to establish a detailed set of standards that can be applied to ongoing maintenance. The list of components and subcomponents will vary from course to course, and thus the importance of the green committee working through the specific details at the course they oversee as opposed to merely replicating what another course has established.

A committee agreed-upon listing of components and subcomponents directly impacts the maintenance infra-



structure (1. maintenance complex, 2. equipment inventory, 3. operating budget – staffing, 4. irrigation system, 5. drainage network, and 6. architecture/design). It is, in fact, a two-way street. The prioritization of components and subcomponents directly impacts the infrastructure, and the infrastructure directly impacts the listing — they must be in sync. If, as an example, one of the subcomponents under greens is to utilize walk-behind mowers, the equipment inventory must include enough machines to make it possible. On the other hand, if using walk-behind mowers is not economically possible for a course or desired by the committee, that specific subcomponent will need to reflect the use of triplex mowers.

Screening the prioritized listing, which is in sync with the infrastructure, via agronomic building blocks (1. fertilization; 2. mowing — type of mower, sharpness, and bench setting; 3. growing environment — sunlight and air movement/drainage; and 4. water management — drainage/aeration plus irrigation/rainfall) ensures sustainability. Excessive low mowing, as an example, will produce ultra-fast pace, but the turf will not exhibit good dependability. This means the subcomponent under greens that identifies the desired speed range must be in step with the infrastructure, while carefully considering the agronomic building blocks so value and dependability are maximized. Clearly, it will require a significant time commitment for the committee to work through the process of establishing, implementing, and monitoring maintenance standards. Nonetheless, the benefits more than justify the commitment.

In the final analysis, the prioritization of course components is the committee's job, not that of the staff.

The superintendent should provide professional agronomic guidance, but the specific prioritization should be agreed upon and set in motion by the green committee. In other words, the committee should establish policy, and the superintendent should then implement the defined standards. The lack of defined standards from the green committee means the superintendent is forced to guesstimate — unity is presumed, but confusion reigns, agronomics is compromised, and costs go up. Lessons learned are clear — it's important for every club to have a dedicated, open-minded, and available green committee that establishes maintenance standards via the guidance of a qualified golf course superintendent. The end result will be a moving of the ugly to good and a blocking of the bad. Golfers will appreciate what they have and a sustainable program will be set in motion.

REFERENCES

"A Guide for Green Committee Members," United States Golf Association, Green Section, 2010. ([TGIF Record 166733](#))

"The Economy and Golf Course Maintenance," *USGA Green Section Record*, Bob Brame, March-April 2004. ([TGIF Record 94016](#))

"Setting Standards" *USGA Green Section Record*, Todd Lowe, September-October 2005. ([TGIF Record 106021](#))

BOB BRAME works with courses throughout the North Central Region to help maximize maintenance efficiency and turf dependability, as well as guiding unbiased unveiling.



The green committee chair and superintendent must be open and transparent with each other and all members of the committee, especially when there are issues that compromise desired maintenance and playability.