

Deferred Maintenance Is No Bargain

Why short-term cutbacks now may ultimately cause problems later that are more costly to correct.

BY PATRICK GROSS

The pile just keeps getting bigger – deferred projects, worn-out equipment, an old irrigation system, and an overgrown and increasingly problematic tree population. These are just a few of the most common examples of deferred maintenance and financial cutbacks at golf facilities today, but there are more. Although we want to close our eyes and hope the pile disappears, it never does. What is a golf course to do? Understandably, the downturn in the economy in recent years has been especially difficult on the golf industry. It has forced owners, managers, and superintendents to decide what they can afford to do at the present time and what must be deferred for later.

In some cases, the desire to balance the bottom line has unfortunately extended into even the most basic agronomic practices. Managers, golf professionals, and superintendents face difficult questions. “Do we really need to aerate and topdress greens? If we skip aeration this fall, can we get more play and generate more revenue?” Granted, putting greens won’t die if one treatment is skipped, but it is in the best long-term interest of the golf course to aerate and keep the greens as healthy as possible. Observations over the past four years have been very interesting. In general, skipping one core aeration treatment has had very little impact on the overall performance of greens. But skipping the second, third, and maybe fourth treatment has had a cumulative effect on putting greens. This comes in the form of a dense thatch layer that contributes to soft, soggy greens that are more prone to disease. Consequently, more fungicides are applied and extra

hand watering is needed just to keep greens alive under difficult weather conditions. Is this really a bargain?

The same is true about equipment replacement. Fewer and fewer golf facilities have the resources to replace equipment at routine intervals. The sentiment seems to be “keep it running as best you can and we will revisit the equipment replacement plan when we have more money.” Although the equipment is operational, many courses have experienced a steady decline in mowing quality and overall course conditions. In the meantime, costs for parts and repair continue to mount and courses end up spending as much for parts and repairs as they originally spent for the equipment. Do not forget to factor in the downtime for equipment breakdowns and loss in operational efficiency. Is this really a bargain?

The same situation exists with tree maintenance and pruning, irrigation upgrades, special projects, and even routine maintenance. The current approach is focused on cutting back, re-evaluating, and doing what you can with what you have . . . all while claiming to maintain the same standards. This approach seldom works, given the many cutbacks golf facilities have made in recent years.

Making deep financial cuts in the short term may cause problems that require years to correct. Chances are it will be more expensive in the long run. Such short-term decisions need to be made with a long-term view on how they will affect operations and course conditions in the future.

Understandably, few golf facilities have the same resources they did five or 10 years ago to accomplish all the projects and even the standard prac-

tices that were typical at that time. Until such resources are available, it is critical for owners, managers, and superintendents to carefully evaluate expectations for course conditioning and adjust maintenance standards to accurately reflect what can be done with the available budget. Identify where to excel and where to conserve resources. Communicate your strategy. Acknowledge the pile isn’t getting smaller.

An economic day of reckoning is coming, and every golf facility must choose when to deal with it. Either strategic management decisions will be made about where course conditions will excel and where they will diminish, or the pile will continue to grow, inevitably resulting in inefficient and unpredictable reactive maintenance.

Does this mean that course conditions will drastically worsen? Not necessarily. For most golf facilities, it is still possible to produce quality tees, fairways, and greens on a modest budget by focusing on basic and necessary agronomic programs. In other words, resources should be focused down the middle of the course. Conditions may not be the same, but they can still be very good as long as basic agronomic programs are not on the deferred list. The basics are always a sound investment and, ultimately, a good bargain.

PAT GROSS is director of the Southwest Region, where he shares practical information on golf course maintenance topics with facilities in California and Mexico.