

That's a Great Idea!

But can the cost be absorbed?

BY KEITH HAPP

All too often assumptions are made about the completion of projects, course adjustments, or improvements without full consideration of the established maintenance budget. Adding, moving, or removing bunkers, building new tees, making the course more playable, or even trying to enhance the first impression of the facility by landscaping the grounds are just a few ideas frequently posed by committees or course officials during Turf Advisory Service visits. In most instances, these ideas are great and worth considering. However, it is important to ask, "Can the change in maintenance or cost of a project be absorbed by the current budget, or will additional capital funds be necessary?"

THE BUDGET PROCESS

There is a cost to every task performed on the golf course, and controlling and managing costs are important. Budgeting realistically while still achieving golfer satisfaction is challenging. Golfer expectations must be realistic as they relate to the budget, or expectations will never be met.

The primary focus when planning and budgeting for course maintenance operations should be center lines of the course, or down the middle. Once the center lines of the course have been funded, efforts to groom the periphery are implemented as resources allow. Despite what many golfers think, most golf facilities cannot condition the playing surfaces from property line to property line in the same manner. It is simply too expensive to do so.

Difficult decisions must be made whenever projects or course improvement ideas are requested after the maintenance budget has already been approved. The costs of such efforts, if small, can occasionally be absorbed by the current maintenance budget. If not, then it must be accounted for by either requesting additional funding or



One of the great things about golf is that no two courses are alike. Despite what many may think, most golf facilities cannot afford to be conditioned from property line to property line in the same manner.



Mowing is by far the most important practice to prepare golf courses for play each day. Priorities are established (greens > approaches > green surrounds > fairways > tees > rough) and these priorities should drive the budgeting process.



Widening an approach to improve playability may be a great idea. However, in addition to funding the renovation project, it will be necessary to increase funding for ongoing maintenance of any new area.

eliminating a task, practice, or project to free up necessary funds.

LABOR

The maintenance budget is not a number grabbed out of thin air. Computer programs are often used to track every detail of course preparation. Labor costs are quantified with time studies, and all applications and course-care efforts are carefully planned and placed on a calendar of events. Cost estimates are then tallied and an annual budget is presented for approval.

Time management is essential to course preparation. It is not uncommon to have several jobs posted for each employee each day. In effect, every hour of each working day is managed to maximize productivity. Superintendents make every effort to enhance and maximize worker efficiency.

Recent industry surveys, such as the [2013 State of the Industry](#) in *Golf Course Industry* magazine, have revealed that the state of the golf industry is improving. More rounds are

being played, but significant challenges remain. For example, there continues to be cost cutting focused on labor inputs without being accompanied by the appropriate reduction in golfer expectations for course conditioning. Golfers expect that their conditioning desires and demands will be met despite fewer available resources.

In the business world, and golf is a business, our intuition tells us that it is unreasonable and unrealistic to expect more with less, and it is equally difficult to achieve the same with less. Nonetheless, superintendents are asked to present budgets that reflect maintenance efforts without any fluff or contingencies. When budget cuts are made, all too often a line item is reduced simply because it is a large number or large percentage of the total budget — without any thought as to what it means to course care or conditioning. This is particularly true for the labor line item in the budget. Every labor hour can be tracked and associated with a maintenance task. Knowing the cost to complete a main-

tenance task allows all aspects of course preparation to be adjusted and kept in line with the budget. Knowing what it costs to perform each and every task helps determine if additional practices, services, or projects can be absorbed into the existing budget or if additional funding is needed. Most important, if budget cuts are requested, current tasks or programs can be altered, reduced, or omitted because they now have a cost associated with them. Putting a real cost to a given maintenance task makes it tangible.

Tracking labor expense (labor hours per task) provides an opportunity to accurately estimate the cost of adding a new task, expanding the care of a specific area of the course, or attempting an “in-house” project within the parameters of an established, agreed-upon annual budget. In other words, if something new is going to be performed or added, it comes at a cost. That cost can be managed in the form of increased revenue (dues or fees) or by the elimination of a task already being performed.

MOWING

By far, mowing is the most common daily activity performed to prepare the turf for play. The frequency of mowing varies by time of year and from course to course, but the priorities of importance do not. The order of priority is greens, approaches, green surrounds, fairways, tees, and finally rough. Adjustments in this mowing priority list will necessitate budget changes to accommodate the cost of preparation. This is particularly important when preparing the course for championships or special events, as requests for a special course setup are frequently made. The cost of doing so is seldom incorporated into the budget.

SPECIAL EVENTS

Mowing is often intensified for championships and special events. Multiple mowings may be performed daily on putting greens, fairways, and tees. For

a short period of time, such as for an event that spans two, three, or four days, the event may require as much mowing or more than would typically be conducted over an entire week of normal play. This type of intensified course preparation is not sustainable. Golf facilities that host televised golf events are fortunate to have suppliers that lend additional equipment for the week, as well as dozens of volunteers to complete the intensified preparation of the course for the duration of the event. Without extra equipment and free volunteer labor, however, implementation of these practices comes at a cost to your golf facility, primarily in the area of added labor and overtime, and should be accounted for within the budget.

PLAYABILITY ADJUSTMENTS

To make the golf course more playable or more interesting, a course official

may suggest widening an approach or creating collection areas around several greens. These types of changes to the golf course can certainly add variety to the game and enhance golfer enjoyment. Because these changes may make the course more playable for everyone, which is important for sustaining and growing the game, this could indeed be a good idea. But good ideas still cost money, and such adjustments to the course must be taken into consideration. While making small adjustments in mowing practices can oftentimes be absorbed by the current budget, creating significant additional mowing requirements cannot.

Another idea that is often considered is converting primary rough to a lower height of cut, such as intermediate rough or even fairway. This is a common request when there is a significant forced carry from forward tees to reach the fairway or from a fairway to an



Requests for enhanced preparation for special events require additional funding to complete. Intensified mowing and other tasks cannot be absorbed into an established budget.



Superintendents are required to present cost estimates that are high on efficiency. There is little to no wiggle room for unexpected requests, which means it is not realistic to expect that added costs can be absorbed once the budget is approved.

elevated green. All golfers cannot negotiate these challenges in the same manner. For example, a forced carry over primary rough to an elevated green does not challenge the low-handicap player to the same degree it does a high-handicap golfer. Adjusting mowing practices can result in a more user-friendly golf course for the broad audience of mid- to high-handicap players. However, an area that was mowed once or twice a week as primary rough would now need to be mowed three to five times a week if converted to a fairway height of cut. Knowing the cost to complete one mowing will help determine if more resources are needed where mowing contours are changed. Often these adjustments are not an absorbable cost into an established maintenance budget.

Mowing strategies are often adjusted to lessen mechanical stress to the turf. Specific equipment, often smaller equipment, is used in certain areas of

the course where turf health is difficult to maintain. What is possible to perform and accomplish is often dictated by funds available for turf care but can also be mandated by course architecture and topography. For example, it may be necessary to walk-mow greens because there is not enough room for larger mowers to operate and turn. When it comes to managing mechanical stress on turf, superintendents choose to keep larger, more difficult-to-manuever equipment away from areas most important to play. Often the results of such practices are positive, which then leads golfers to desire or request use of the same practice on more areas of the course. Yes, implementing these practices is a good idea, but there will be added labor cost to using smaller equipment to manage these areas.

CONSTRUCTION

We have heard many times from course officials that “we don’t need to use a contractor; we can simply build

tees in-house.” It is not realistic to think that this type of work can be completed in season without additional expense or without compromising routine maintenance and course preparation. Completing one project well and at the right time of year is far better than trying to juggle several projects once the golf season is underway. The latter almost always compromises daily course conditioning and essential agronomic practices. If new projects take precedence and critical agronomic practices, although scheduled, are postponed, problems often develop. As the saying goes, “Pay me now or pay me later.”

Construction expense is not the only factor that needs to be considered. Building new tees, particularly forward tees, is a great idea, but ongoing maintenance must be taken into consideration when budgets are developed. A few hundred square feet of additional mowing may be absorbable into an existing budget, but additional pesticides, hand watering, aeration, etc. may not.

PROJECTS

Whether it is a drainage, irrigation, or sod project, it is important to realize that these improvements cannot be completed without funding. The labor to complete these projects should not come from maintenance personnel that must first prepare the course for play each day. Allocating three or four people to a project when staff is limited rarely results in project success without compromising conditions somewhere else on the golf course. It is not realistic to expect that a capital improvement project will be completed at the cost of simply renting a piece of equipment for the maintenance crew to use in their spare time. The crew may have the knowledge and ability to complete the requested work, but what other task will have to be delayed or omitted to get the project done?

Improving drainage infrastructure is a great idea, but the cost of this work cannot be absorbed into an established maintenance budget. If the project cannot be outsourced, the work should be capitalized and scheduled for implementation when regular course maintenance is no longer a necessity.

Retaining personnel to complete this type of work during the fall or even winter is an excellent investment.

GREENS

Without question, one of the criteria most harshly evaluated by golfers is putting green quality. For most golf facilities, rolling is used as a core component of putting green conditioning. Research has shown that rolling can be used to supplement and even replace mowing several times per week to maintain desired putting green smoothness and green speed while promoting healthier grass. Implementing this practice requires additional equipment and personnel. Simply purchasing a roller without considering the labor requirements to implement this strategy in regular maintenance activities will not achieve the desired effect. If funding for routine rolling is not included in the maintenance budget, another practice may have to be eliminated.

ROUGH

A common complaint heard most often in the spring is “the rough is too difficult.” This is generally not a function of mowing height but an issue of mowing frequency. At most golf facilities the rough is mowed once per week at a height of 2.0 to 2.5 inches. Some superintendents have addressed golfer complaints about the rough by mowing specific areas more frequently during the spring “flush” of growth. Another example is a more frequently played area can be mowed in the direction of play to again offer improved playability without adding extra cost to the operation. These maintenance adjustments may be absorbable for half an acre or less, but such an increase in mowing is not absorbable for all of the rough acreage in play. Inevitably, someone will hit a ball into an area of primary rough that results in a difficult playing condition.

We often hear comments that XYZ course down the road has spectacular rough around the greens. If this is true, it is likely that many of their trafficked areas are mowed with walk-behind rotary mowers. At XYZ course, the decision to control mechanical stress by using walk-behind mowers was

previously approved and appropriately funded in the budget. It is a great idea but one that does not come without added cost.

While some golf facilities are not staffed to adjust mowing practices, others may not have the equipment to make the desired adjustments. It takes both. There is a distinct difference between a finish mower and one that is just designed to mow large areas rapidly. Articulating five-plex mowers handle terrain contours without causing scalping damage when they are used near and around important features. Buying additional mowers will require personnel to operate them. Having the equipment is the first step, but it does no good if staffing limits equipment use.

An average-size bunker will require approximately 25 to 30 tons of sand. Small equipment is not designed for hauling this amount of material. The wear on equipment and time to handle the material is not an absorbable cost, especially if labor to complete the work is drawn away from regular maintenance of the course.

Flat-bottom bunkers can be easily managed with mechanical bunker rakes, with just edges needing to be raked by hand so as to maintain a defined margin of the hazard. Hand raking bunkers in their entirety requires more personnel. Raking bunkers by hand is performed for many reasons, but the cost of shifting from machine raking to hand raking is significant and will require more funding.



Superintendents are constantly challenged to come up with efficient ways of meeting golfer expectations while staying within budget. Combining maintenance tasks can improve efficiency, as in this photo where a rotary push mower is transported on the back of a triplex unit and the employee performs both mowing duties.

BUNKERS

One of the most labor-intensive and expensive daily tasks is bunker preparation. However, bunkers are hazards and there is no such thing as a “consistent hazard.” Having bunkers that drain properly and that can be presented well to players is a maintenance standard worth pursuing. If bunkers need to be reconstructed, then it is best to plan for this capital investment. It is not realistic to think that bunker renovation can be conducted with in-house labor during the playing season.

Establishing maintenance standards for bunker presentation is important. Some courses have adopted raking only portions of bunkers rather than the entire hazards. This level of reduced maintenance is not necessarily a cost saving; rather, the maintenance hours are shifted to other areas of course preparation.

CREEK BANKS AND POND SURROUNDS

As noted earlier, center lines of the course take precedence over peripheral areas. There is a cost associated with



Defining where naturalized rough is positioned is very important, and determining how these areas will be maintained is equally important. Maintaining a monostand of grass will require much more than just mowing these areas once or twice a year.

hand mowing around water features on a regular basis, and treating with herbicides takes time and is a cost. Sure, a spray boom pass could be made along the cart path, pond bank, and creek edge, but where do you stop? Maintenance standards are again the key. Standards established due to cost reductions need to be supported. Cutting funding for a practice and then expecting that practice be completed is not realistic or wise.

NATURALIZATION

Determining how and where naturalized rough is to be incorporated is important, and defining the inputs necessary to meet golfer expectations for these areas is equally important. For example, if mowing more than once or twice per year is needed to maintain these areas, this will come with a cost. Herbicides, insecticides, and periodic mowing are

necessary if a monostand of naturalized rough is the goal.

Managing naturalized areas is neither free of cost nor maintenance. The expectations for the appearance and playability of these areas should be documented so that the cost to maintain these areas can be quantified.

CONCLUSION

Superintendents focus on playing conditions despite budget reductions (financial, material, personnel), while striving for economic and environmental sustainability. Golf course maintenance is dynamic, and small/minor adjustments are made each and every day. However, it is essential that all costs of operation are well defined and included in a maintenance budget. If not, it is impossible to avoid the pitfalls of reduced course conditioning and/or exceeding the budget when attempting

to absorb unplanned maintenance costs into an existing budget.

For best results when it comes to budgeting and entertaining new ideas, golf facilities are urged to:

- Budget realistically to meet the needs and desires of golfers.
- Schedule to implement course alterations or projects when they will not compromise course preparation during the playing season.
- Use long-range planning to incorporate new ideas and course conditioning concepts.
- Know the cost of every task performed on the golf course to best determine if the cost of a new idea can be absorbed by the existing budget.

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