TOP TEN COURSE TAKEAWAYS

Cutting Maintenance Costs
And Maintaining the Experience

GOLF COURSE SUPERINTENDENTS ARE A VERY DEDICATED AND HARD WORKING MEMBER OF THE MANAGEMENT TEAM AND AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE OVERALL MEMBER EXPERIENCE AT A CLUB.

More often than not, when provided a challenge such as finding a way to cut maintenance costs, their response is seldom, no this can’t be done. In today’s downturned economy, course expectations are the same but superintendents are asked to accomplish that, with less and less each year, all while trying to minimize the impact on playing conditions.

Here are some ideas to help bring down the course maintenance costs without impacting the playing conditions or the member experience (too much!)

1. Reduce equipment spending. It’s a challenge for superintendents to make their equipment last longer than initially planned or expected. Reduced equipment spending can help, but the downside can affect the club’s bottom line with increases in parts, repairs and hours spent on maintenance.

If a new purchase is necessary, try creative leasing, buying used equipment (which can mean selling your used equipment) or financing. If you do choose to buy, negotiate an extended warranty (for example four years instead of three) this will cover an extra year of life on the back end of your equipment, which could stave off new battery purchases for an entire fleet.

If you do plan to keep your equipment, hire a qualified fleet manager who cannot only maintain equipment, but who can also manage inventory, control parts and develop a preventative maintenance program. Cost savings could very easily make up their extra salary over two to three years.

2. Defer capital projects. Is a course renovation on the books? Can it be put it on hold for a year or two? Can you revisit your club’s strategic plan and re-define the plan for capital projects?

3. Calibrate sprayers and check/replace nozzles. If your nozzles are worn or not working properly, you may be over-spraying by as much as 10 percent, which is a 10 percent increase on your cost. Even worse, a failed spray because of poor calibration means you may have to spray again.

4. Encourage staff suggestions. For example, an employee at Aurora Golf suggested adjusting the fairway-mowing schedule. The employee noted that fairways grew at different rates in different areas of the golf course, and grew at different rates during different times of the year. Since the goal is to provide great fairway playing surfaces all the time, the fairway mower operator was put in charge of the fairway-mowing schedule. How often fairways got mowed was determined by this employee and based on the rate the fairway turf was growing at that particular time.

5. Reduce water usage. In arid parts of the country, irrigation can very easily be the most expensive part of your budget. Manage your water by looking at how much you are putting out and where it’s necessary. Strong consideration should be given to reduction of turfgrass or water-dependent landscaping. Replacing expensive turfgrass and landscaping with natural or drought tolerant vegetation or hardscaping (all rock landscaping) can save thousands in unnecessary water bills.

Several water districts in California and Nevada have offered turf buy backs to take acreage out of club irrigation. Clubs can use wood chips, decomposed granite or hardscaping and reap the long-term benefits…less water, less cost; now and in the future.

6. Use test plots before committing. If you’ve chosen to landscape with natural vegetation, drought tolerant plants or hardscaping, select a hole or two to redesign based on your choices and ask the membership to vote on which they prefer. This keeps the membership happy and will ultimately
reduce your overall water and maintenance bill. **Remember to keep member expectations inline with what you can deliver financially.**

7. **Labor.** Reduce seasonal labor, allow non-salaried employees to go home on rainy days and employ less full-time and more part-time maintenance staff. Shift your thinking, i.e. extra staff to mow in the early morning or late afternoon hours and minimum staff during peak club hours. Or gap maintenance every day…clear the tee sheets between 11 and 12 and send the mowers out during those times, they are more efficient when no one is on the course.

Bear in mind, you can only reduce your work force so much before it begins to have a negative impact on your course and its playability. Be cautioned that you can cut the fat out of the budget – but eventually you may start cutting into the bone.

8. **Reduce energy costs.** Managing fuel costs is difficult and normally out of a superintendent's control. However, opting for items such as electric-powered equipment, turning your maintenance shed into a solar charging station for your electric golf carts may be cost-effective ways to save in the long run. Other alternatives such as charging your carts during off-peak hours with a watt miser from Club Car or running water pumps overnight can save the club thousands.

9. **Communicate.** One of the most important things when it comes to cutting costs is to make sure you have a strong and open communication path with your board of directors and general manager/COO, or owner. Anytime you make cuts in your budget, it's going to effect golf course conditions in some way. It's just a matter of how it's communicated to your members so that their expectations are in line with the budget cuts.

Times have changed and we need to manage things differently. If everyone involved is on the same page, then any budget cut is less noticeable and more acceptable.

10. **Remain optimistic.** We've seen slow improvements over the past few years and are optimistic these trends will continue. The key to remaining optimistic is to adjust management and member expectations to match the finished product.  

A special thank you to Bruce Williams, CGCS, principal of Bruce Williams Golf Consulting and Executive Golf Search; Dennis Lyon, CGCS, retired, Aurora, CO; Todd Bohn, CGCS, Wolf Creek Golf Links, Olathe, KS; Andrew Morris, CGCS, Country Club Of Peoria, IL

If you have an idea for a top 10 takeaway, contact Heather Arias de Cordoba at heather@apcd.com