

**F**orgive me in advance if this article rambles a bit — I'm trying to make sense of the current economic state of the golf industry and "the big picture" is still fuzzy. Pending changes at Palm Beach National after 21 years of service have made this my number-one priority.

Articles and conversations with peers indicate that finding and retaining good golf course employees is a superintendent's most pressing issue. We joked in Naples at the Poa that the

unemployment rate was 2 percent, and that 4 percent of the population didn't want to work. I don't remember anyone laughing.

Last year a record 509 golf courses in the U.S. opened for play, with another 936 courses under construction. According to the National Golf Foundation, the number of golfers and the rounds they play have remained stagnant for a decade. Each year about 3 million people take up the

game, but nearly 3 million golfers also drop out. The reasons: golf is too expensive, too time-consuming, too difficult, and too intimidating. If these figures are correct, the math indicates that every golf course, with each year's new course openings, has fewer and fewer golfers and rounds available to draw from with which to cover its expenses.

Pride may keep most people from admitting that affordability is the main reason they left the game, but I think there is little doubt that the high cost of golf is the main culprit. The perception of growth and prosperity in golf is bolstered by our current strong economy, with the high end and low end clubs weathering the storm of competition better than many of the clubs in the middle. But is this going to last?

We have enough delinquent accounts at our club to hint that many members desire the country club lifestyle, but really just can't afford it. We also have our share of "trunk slammers" (a new word I just learned from Marty Griffin) — members who come out and play their

round of golf and leave — who will not support the bar, the dining room, or the pro shop with purchases. We used to have one older member who poured a shot of vodka from a bottle in his trunk at the conclusion of his morning round, and would toast us if we happened to be driving by. By far the weirdest factor in the mix is the rumor that one nearby club with very low rates is owned by underworld types who need some place to launder their money, and that they are looking to purchase another club in our area. Is reporting to a Godfather any worse than the typical green committee Chairman? But I digress.

For superintendents, this continued growth — perceived or actual — appears, on the surface, to be a good thing. More golf courses mean more superintendent positions. The more prestigious clubs pay higher and higher salaries, while the clubs feeling the economic squeeze look to management companies or bargain basement superintendents.

Meanwhile, the turf schools continue to churn out graduates. Is this really a good thing? Where, exactly, are we headed? Are superintendents like pro athletes, with the stars getting it while they can and everyone else struggling to make the team? I think most of us, at least those in my age group and older, expected to make a lifelong career out of being a golf course superintendent. I look around me and see how many ex-superintendents are on the commercial side of golf, and how few superintendents are age 50 or older. Is this what we want?

I'm not offering any answers; pretty much I was just thinking out loud. I do think that we have the opportunity to help shape our own futures through our organizations' activities, rather than just being kites caught in the winds of market forces. Job security and stability are issues superintendents have talked about for decades, and we still haven't made much progress.

My opinion is that anything we do to enhance the stature, prestige, and professional relevance of the golf course superintendent will help all superintendents with job security and longevity. Are you doing your part?

## The Numbers Don't Crunch

### Mark My Words



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