Superintendents should strive to raise visibility of profession

The Golf Course Superintendents Association of America has been the topic of many animated discussions over the last several months, and for good reason. Any time an association as large as the GCSAA proposes a substantial dues increase there is bound to be chatter amongst its members. But when you add a possible relocation, PDI implementation and a public relations flap over excessive (or necessary) board of director travel, conversations among GCSAA members get downright heated.

We've tackled the above issues in the pages of Golf Course News this month. In the Point/Counterpoint below, the merits of changing the GCSAA's articles of incorporation in order to ease relocation are debated. Our page one Q&A with GCSAA CEO Stephen F. Mona, however, puts this debate and other issues in proper perspective. The GCSAA has a long list of initiatives, but what exactly is it trying to accomplish?

According to Mona, it all boils down to "providing the best possible future for our members." And a key part of that is raising the level of recognition, visibility and credibility of the golf course superintendent. By doing so, Mona hopes that superintendents will have more job security, more lucrative jobs and increased career opportunities. These are worthy, and needed, goals.

I went to Boone, N.C., this fall to talk to the Carolinas Golf Course Superintendents about these goals, and what superintendents could do to achieve them.

At the cocktail reception the night before my talk, the barkeep, who assured me he played golf, asked me in a hushed voice, "What exactly do these supervisors do anyway?"

His question may be ignorable, but it makes sense. Superintendents are supposed to do their jobs as quietly as possible. They have to get on the course early, get the work done and get the kibitz out of there and let the golfers play. Superintendents, then, must take another avenue to "advertise" their importance.

I've seen plenty of examples this year of superintendents increasing why they could irrigate while homeowners had to let their lawns die. And superintendents handling numerous renovations wrote regular articles in club newsletters keeping members aware of project timelines. By communicating proactively, these superintendents increased their effectiveness, profile and importance. So don't just rely on the GCSAA to do it for you. Get out there and practice the art of self-promotion.

Of course I'm one to talk, my father-in-law doesn't even know what I do for a living. According to this year's family Christmas letter, I am the editor of "International Golf Club News" and get to "play at prestigious golf clubs around the world." I wish.
GCN adds Thomas, Hirsh to advisory board

Golf Course News has added superintendent Steve Thomas and golf course consultant Laurence Hirsh to its advisory board in a move to further bolster its position as the business newspaper for the golf course industry.

The other concerns have merit as well, but they can be addressed without such a drastic measure. If for instance, Orlando, Fla., is an attractive location, a satellite office could be opened for an interim period until attractive market conditions present themselves. We discovered the value of a satellite office when GCSSA opened its Singapore branch in the early 1980s. It gave us the opportunity to observe the markets in that region until we discovered it was not in our best interest to be there. There should be no rush to change the articles before the members specifically know where we are going and the costs of going there.

There is precedent for the limitation of power. Many country clubs limit the amount of money a board of directors can spend without membership approval. Governments too, institute controls for the appropriation of funds. Referendums are frequently placed on election ballots, enabling communities and school districts to pass bond issues without leaving the details to the elected leadership.

A financial restriction on board spending would allow the GCSSA membership a greater voice and it would encourage due process. Spending in excess of this monetary limit would require member approval. This kind of restraint does not weaken the board's ability to negotiate; it strengthens their ability to bargain with self-assurance and the support of the membership. Also, it ensures that every stakeholder has a voice and it ensures that the veracity of our leaders remains intact.

Apathy is normal in large organizations. However, one way to increase apathy is to erode the power of the constituency by allowing fewer and fewer people a voice in the process. We can keep the membership engaged if we keep control of the association in the hands of the members. Additionally, we shield the board of directors from accusations of impropriety if we place limits on their powers.

Do we want to amend our articles of incorporation first, and unconditionally empower the majority of a nine-member board to relocate our association? If this is the path we choose, five people will control whether we move and where we move — without member approval. I suggest we leave the articles alone until the members have had an opportunity to review and endorse the process.

Before changing the articles of incorporation, let the members vote on the course of action. Once approved, the articles can be amended, allowing the board of directors the autonomy to proceed. Our delegate system will assure this is done quickly. In this manner, the staff and board will have the members' full support and trust to act in their behalf.

By enhancing a trusting relationship among staff, leaders and members, future issues needing membership approval will find fewer roadblocks. Only by instituting a system of checks and balances can we protect the larger issue: that of maintaining the integrity of the process.