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The master plan and consensus

Recently a caller began a conversation by saying, "I'm on the green committee at my country club, and I represent a small faction of members who..." I soon wished the call had come from "60 Minutes" or the IRS!

The caller, having just rotated onto the committee, was trying to get up to speed on a renovation plan that was well along in the process. He wanted to know whether spending \$3 million on the architect's proposal, which included some re-routing for length, was "right for their course," and whether they should bring in another architect for a "second opinion."

His timing was wrong. At best his questions would disrupt or delay the process. At worst, he would set up a daring ambush for the voting meeting, the likes of which have not been seen since Bonnie and Clyde!

I told him that the master plan is not the pretty picture you see on the clubhouse wall. It's really the collaborative process that develops that picture. While there is no one right way to approach renovation, in terms of style, there is a right way to complete the master plan process. Each club must achieve a consensus, and club leadership must unite behind that consensus.

Obviously, that can be difficult! Just as obviously, this member was working outside the consensus process. However well intentioned, no matter how "right" he feels he is on either the cost or the direction of the design proposals, this member's actions can't benefit his club.

I've seen this happen. Whether due to a member who simply likes to create havoc, clashing personalities, or payback for old disputes, it's called "club politics." The good news is most of these situations arise because members truly love their courses and agree it would be terrible to make a major renovation mistake. The bad news is that, like the Democrats and Republicans on the national political scene, that's about all they agree on! Politicians have divergent views about what's "good for America" as do members about "what's best for the club."

Everyone at the club has their own unique perspective.

Some members may want a restoration of their fine old course. Others want a new look. Older members fear losing playing time with course closure for renovations,

and fear the new course will be too difficult. Younger members want a tougher course.

In the current economy, many members are struggling just to pay current dues, much less any new assessments. These members may question golf course renovation costs, perhaps cloaking their true motives behind other issues. Others simply prefer to put off costs until the need is pressing – usually when disaster strikes in the form of major course loss or damage.

The club manager is probably looking further ahead, hoping to make the course as attractive to new members as it is to existing ones. The superintendent wants changes that allow him or her to maintain the course to everyone's high – and ever-rising – standards, knowing that budgets will always be tighter than desired.

While all are valid perspectives, they lead to conflicting goals. Any green committee larger than one benevolent dictator will have lingering differences, and several "pet issues" to resolve. It's best if a few well-respected members agree to be "flag bearers" for the master plan. They need the leadership capabilities to make good decisions. They need the people skills to overcome inevitable objections. And they need sales skills to gain approval for the plan, which means demonstrating some tangible benefits of the proposed plan for nearly everyone.

An experienced architect helps make the right decisions and communicates them, based on analysis of your course needs, and what you can afford to spend. I've recently completed renovations from \$350,000 to over \$3 million. Each was the right solution for that particular course, so don't be surprised if costs come in higher – or lower – than you expected. Be open to the proposals of the architect you entrust with your course and never assume your project should be like the one down the street.

It's great when members have strong interests in their courses. Healthy and timely debate is part of the master plan consensus process. However, overly strong, untimely or uninformed opinions and input that override a well thought-out process can torpedo the best plans for no reason. Remind those who disagree strongly during these debates that golf course remodeling is not a life and death matter.

It's also wrong for this member to imply that a reputable architect is selling changes to make more money. Unsuitable and/or overpriced projects eventually diminish business for architects, as word travels. It's a great incentive to keep things realistic.

My caller ignored the fact that their architect had already developed several design proposals, based on all available information and perspectives, using his "disinterested opinion" on matters that may be emotional for members. He has probably answered objections, quantified benefits, and assisted the green committee in selecting the most favorable plans. In short, one architect is usually capable of looking at the project in many different ways, negating the need for a second opinion.

A second architect would be under pressure to offer differing opinions. Even if his or her ideas fit the small faction's tastes, would they be representative of the club as a whole? Would they be better? Would there be consensus? Changing architects mid-stream achieves a new start, not a quick or suitable conclusion.

Some clubs do go through a series of architects, often for the wrong reasons, and usually for the wrong results. It is a mistake to interview architects until they find the one who'll tell them what they want to hear regarding cost or direction.

Some green committees legitimately learn as they go. They come out of their first master plan united only in the opinion that they "need a mulligan" by virtue of knowledge gained in the process. And, there are "horses for courses," meaning that an architect may unfortunately prove less experienced or philosophically different than the needs of your project demand. If so, they should tell the architect that his or her skill set is not what they need, and find one that better suits them.

Ideally, your club will pick the best architect initially and stick with them throughout the project for continuity. If you go through the proper process of selecting your architect, developing and communicating your master plan, and getting it approved, the result is confidence that you have probably done the right thing. There also will be fewer membership challenges. More importantly, you'll have greater chances of success. GCN