

Share and share alike

COOPERATIVE PURCHASING AND EQUIPMENT SHARING HELP MANAGEMENT OPERATE FACILITIES MORE EFFICIENTLY AND IMPROVE THE BOTTOM LINE

by
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The marketplace is tight, and golf course superintendents are feeling the pinch.

Corporate belt-tightening and recreational travel reductions have reduced the number of rounds played at many courses and, in turn, have put a greater focus on strategies to maintain profitability. Saturation of courses in key markets has stiffened the competition and put more strain on budgets. The gas-price hikes of 2005 and 2006 forced further examination of expenditures and exploration of methods to improve efficiency while holding the line on spending.

In view of all this, management of some

courses is finding ways to increase its equipment arsenal without boosting budgets.

Let's do it together

Finch Services is a John Deere distributor that has locations in Westminster, Md., Hanover, Pa., North Wales, Pa., and Huntington, Pa. President Ray Finch says he's seen a bit of joint purchasing throughout the years, most likely involving courses that have the same ownership. It's basically for specialty equipment that's used for short periods and can be moved between courses in a relatively close geographic area. A unit could be leased or purchased, whichever best

fits the overall equipment program.

A prime market for equipment sharing is courses owned by government agencies facing tightening budgets.

"I'm aware of a recent purchase of a deep-tine aerator by a Baltimore-area county that plans to share the unit between six golf courses," Finch says.

The state of Kentucky recently purchased a tractor and aerator to serve 22 courses, says Chris Bernauer, controller for John Deere distributor Xenia Power Equipment in Ohio. A government entity owns the equipment, which is used on government-owned courses and is in constant use, Bernauer says.

Bernauer doesn't know of a specific superintendent who jointly purchases equipment with a course owned by a different entity, but he's seeing more management companies bringing in specialty equipment to be shared among the courses they operate, especially in metro markets.

One superintendent working within such an arrangement is Rick Darby, golf course superintendent at Arizona National Golf Club in Tucson. The course is one of four in the Tucson area under the umbrella of the I.R.I. Golf Group. Two of the courses are about five miles apart at the north end of Tucson and two are about one mile apart in the Green Valley area. The equipment is leased through the I.R.I. Golf Group, and allocation is made to each specific course. The lease agreement for the two courses to the north – Arizona National and Forty-Niner Country Club – is one package that's rolling over into its third year. The equipment for the Green Valley courses – Canoa Hills Golf Club and San Ignacio Golf Club – also is part of one lease package, which is in its first year.

"By leasing, we always have the most current equipment," Darby says.



The state of Kentucky shares a tractor and aerator that serves 22 golf courses, according to a John Deere distributor. Photo: John Deere Golf & Turf

With this program, each course has all the day-to-day equipment on site. They also share other equipment.

"Typically, I have most of the shared equipment at my course, including the trenchers, wire locating equipment and a greens roller," Darby says. "If another course needs these items for an irrigation project, our crew will make sure they're ready to use. The other course will come here to get the equipment and bring it back in the same shape as it left here when they've finished with it."

With projects such as aerating, the maintenance staffs on each course might work as a team so they don't have to purchase, lease or rent additional equipment.

"We tend to schedule these projects a couple weeks apart so we can complete work on one of the properties and then transport the equipment to the next course," Darby says. "Occasionally, we'll also share the labor so we can double up to get the work done faster."

"We're saving money by sharing," he adds. "Sometimes it can be a hindrance if you want a specific unit and need to make arrangements to get it. That can set you back a day or two, but overall, it works out very well."

Sharing is caring

Despite I.R.I. Golf Group's purchasing habits, Josh Shull doesn't see courses working out joint buying or leasing arrangements through a sales representative or a distributor because each course has a pretty good assortment of equipment in its own maintenance shop. Shull is a sales representative with TurfWerks, a Jacobsen distributor with locations in Omaha, Neb., Sioux Falls, S.D., and Johnston, Iowa.

"But I am aware of quite a bit of borrowing or sharing of equipment if there's a breakdown with a specific unit or for special projects," he says. "It's more of a personal relationship than a formal agreement."

Speaking of sharing, John Temme and Chris Coen, who have known each other for 12 years and work 10 miles apart, are a good example. Temme, golf course superintendent of Wakonda Club in Des Moines, Iowa, and Coen, golf course superintendent of Glen Oaks Country Club in West Des Moines, say sharing equipment is a great way to extend their resources while keeping their budgets in check.

"We usually talk to each other daily and probably share something about once a



A Big John tree transplanter was shared among Chicago-area municipal courses in exchange for trees. Photo: Big John Tree Transplanter Mfg.

week," says Temme, who worked for Coen before accepting the position at Wakonda Club. "It's all based on a handshake agreement. We pick up equipment in good shape and return it in good shape. If it breaks on our property, we fix it. I even bought a trailer to facilitate the exchange."

The cooperation between the two has expanded into the aerification process.

"In the fall, my equipment and crew go over to help Chris aerify his greens, and his equipment and crew come here to help aerify ours," Temme says. "The host course provides lunch."

Typically, they'll exchange two greens aerifiers, blowers, drag mats, the sand topdresser and about 10 crew members, Coen says.

"We each pay our own crews no matter which course they're working on," he says. "Since our courses are similar, it all works out during the year."

Coen and Temme also share equipment with other Des Moines-area courses.

"We all look to each other's courses for the equipment we only use once or twice a year," Coen says. "It's just smart business."

When the annual capital budgets are being developed, the two check with each other and the other area courses because they don't want to buy duplicate equipment.

"If it's in our shop 90 percent of the time, we can share it," Temme says.

"We try to buy equipment no one else has so that, jointly, we have all the tools we need to maintain our courses," Coen says.

Timing also is important.

"I bought a big leaf sweeper that I use primarily in the fall because we have lots of large trees," Temme says. "Chris uses it during the

summer when dethatching fairways."

Although the two courses are competitors, the boards and membership of both back the cooperative relationship.

"They think it's great because we can finish big tasks such as aerification in half the time, and they get the course back sooner," Temme says. "They've seen the cost savings, too, and are very supportive of the arrangement."

Three facilities jointly own one item. The Hyperion Field Club in Johnston, Iowa, joined in for a three-way purchase of a concrete saw. Each pitched in \$500. It stays on the shelf in the shop of whichever course used it last until someone else needs it. Just like the rest of this cooperative arrangement, it's practical, logical and effective.

Consider this

For all the positives of jointly purchasing or sharing equipment, pitfalls need to be recognized and avoided. For courses in close enough proximity to share, regional agronomic needs generally happen at the same time, especially with aeration and seeding, says Scott Kinkead, executive vice president of Turfco.

"The challenge is to fit key equipment use within a pretty intense time schedule," Kinkead says. "They need clearly defined parameters and good synergy. Joint ownership would work better with equipment that wasn't as weather dependent and was used less frequently, such as a tree spade or backhoe."

If a joint-purchased or loaned unit was damaged, even if the one using it was going to pay for the repairs, it could be out of

equipment management



A seeder is an example of a piece of equipment that's shared among maintenance staffs. Photo: Turfco

service for quite a while, Bernauer says.

"Not having it available for an extended period would be pretty tough to explain to a board," he says. "Basically, golf course boards change annually. So, even if a joint purchase or lease had been approved prior to the arrangement, another board might have an entirely different opinion about it. Also, joint ownership would likely need to be within noncompeting courses. As rounds are harder to gain, I don't see too many courses that aren't in competition with each other."

But superintendents consider all those factors before making a purchasing or sharing decision. Fred Behnke, certified golf course superintendent of Mount Prospect (Ill.) Golf Course is one.

"I discussed joint-purchase options with a group of superintendents during a mid-September meeting," Behnke says. "As we talked about it, the idea became less popular. We discussed the need for use at the same time, who would have the first use option, where the equipment would be stored, and how damage would be handled. The main questions were the feasibility of such an arrangement and how much capital money would be required from each participating course."

Behnke says course management ended up renting or contracting certain services because the course didn't have the specialized equipment.

"We figured if we had access to the equipment, we could do the job with a skilled staff operator for a third of the cost," he says. "It would be great to have a shared interest in a stump grinder or lift-bucket truck. Yet, while all the issues could be resolved, we would have to set up a system to make it work and get the right entities at all the different courses to agree on it."

"In the end, we decided borrowing and sharing equipment on a course-to-course basis as we had been doing was the best approach," he adds. "We do have an unofficial honor system. If equipment is damaged while in use by another course, the user covers the repairs. And we always return the machine in top shape, replacing the tines on a borrowed aerator for example, and filling it with fuel."

Behnke cites a past Chicago-area situation in which a park district course shared a Big John tree transplanter they purchased to move multiple large trees on its property. Other park district and municipal courses could use the machine in exchange for a tree. For every three trees the borrower moved, they'd dig one tree of equal size and take it to the owner's course to plant.

"It worked well for everyone until they ran out of room for more trees," Behnke says. "The window of opportunity closed due to lack of space."

Yet, because the benefits are appealing, superintendents continue to explore innovative options for sharing equipment. GCN

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Some of the equipment used at Glen Oaks Country Club (pictured) is shared with the Wakonda Club because the clubs' golf course superintendents are cooperative and the courses are 10 miles apart. Photo: Glen Oaks Country Club