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THE STRESS TEST OF 2011

If you count yourself as one of 2011's golf turf survivors, then I offer you sincere congratulations. In addition to stress, worry and economy-driven heart palpitations, many survivors suffered in their positions. We all worked with less and often worked for less.

Okay, that was the good news. Now here's the bad.

From my unique perch as a turf pro and a columnist, I would recommend upping dosage of your heart medicine for this dire prediction: 2012 could be more of the same, if not worse.

We start the year with unemployment at 8.5 percent, a minimal 0.6 percent improvement since last August. And this may be a misleading number because it doesn't include those who have stopped looking for work. Almost half of all Americans can now be classified as either in poverty or low income.

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Since I retired at the end of 2008, I have traveled my home state of Wisconsin extensively. I cannot think of a single course that doesn't need either more members or more players. It is difficult to see how that will improve this year. Golf is discretionary spending and there simply isn't as much entertainment money around as in previous years.

It is nearly impossible to increase revenues in this climate, so golf course budgets are met by expense reductions. There have been instances that insurance money from a disaster (hail, for example) has offered some financial relief. And then there are courses that suffered damage from Imprelis herbicide that are counting

on payments for their damage to help better position their finances. A club in our town sold quite a few lifetime memberships and was able to relieve significant debt.

Cases like the above are few and far between, and the budget-cutting knife is drawn most often. This will continue in 2012, I fear. Golf course equipment is not being replaced like it should be, and a lot of it is getting really old. There is a point of diminishing returns – at some point repairs cost more than a machine is worth.

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I have seen golf course crews shrink. A golf course budget mostly is labor, so it is no surprise that is where the greatest reductions take place. We have seen veteran superintendents released and others leaving for other jobs with the certainty their position will be downgraded. Some accept the salary reduction and hope to stay until retirement.

Winter in our part of the country makes courses actually close shops during those months the courses are closed. They opt to send equipment out for repair or wait until breakdowns actually occur before making fixes. In doing this, some superintendent positions have actually become seasonal, part-time jobs. That could continue this year.

We have seen courses eliminate all overtime pay and even trim golf course summer jobs to something less than 40 hours a week. The toughest for me to see has been the willingness of some organizations, maybe out of

necessity, to eliminate health insurance and retirement benefits.

I work on membership in our turfgrass association part-time, maintaining attendance at our events as well as seeking out sources for larger donations. It has been a daunting battle, just like the daily life for many superintendents. What may be most frustrating for my colleagues is there hasn't been a change in player expectation, the significant decreases in resources notwithstanding.

Superintendents are a creative lot,

and I expect to see more sharing of equipment and maybe even some sharing of staff when aerifying, overseeding and any other procedure that is infrequent but labor and equipment intensive. I am surprised there hasn't been more cooperative purchasing, but it seems a good way to potentially save more money. My successor and another local course have done this and it's worked well.

I'm curious if the economy has yet affected enrollment in the turfgrass major at our colleges and tech schools around the country. It would seem it should have by now.

Although I sometimes wonder if I was lucky and worked during golf's zenith years, I still believe golf's appeal will carry us through. I remember, back in the 1960s, of quickly taking our John Bean sprayer onto the course because one of the fairways was on fire! Mostly, we are still far ahead of those days, and I doubt we are going back there. **GCI**