When selling an irrigation system to members and owners, your reasons for doing so had better...

Hold Water

BY PETER BLAIS

Superintendent Greg Pheneger knew he had a problem at his 10-year-old West Course, one of three layouts at Johns Island Club in Vero Beach, Fla. The course's irrigation system was experiencing a leak a week — 55 in a single year on the service Ts. The system's irrigation heads were also throwing water into native vegetation areas that were supposed to be unirrigated.

Pheneger held four informational meetings to explain the need for the new $1 million irrigation system he recently installed on the course. The first meeting was for members with names ending in A-D, the second for members with names from E-L and so on.

"We wanted to keep the numbers of people low at each meeting, so they could ask questions. Holding those meetings was key to getting the project approved," says Pheneger, who also used photos and other visual aids to make his case. "We had some dramatic pictures of leaks."

As Pheneger discovered, selling members or owners on the costly idea of updating an irrigation system is no easy task. It requires that superintendents do their homework and follow through in a business-like manner.

Determining the need

When a superintendent notices numerous dry areas or wet spots on a golf course, it might be time for a new a new irrigation system, says John Foy, agronomist for the USGA Green Section's Florida Region. Ted Horton, who recently left Pebble Beach Co. as vice president of resource management to form his own turfgrass consulting firm in Southern California, says other hints that a new irrigation system might be needed are:

• not getting enough water to the right places at the right time;
• developing hard lines along cart paths, wooded areas or native plant growth; and
• controls, whether computer or manually operated, that fail to pull together

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the irrigation system and evapotranspiration equipment.

Above-ground items — sprinkler heads, pump stations and controllers — can be replaced anytime, says Terry Buchen, a turfgrass consultant from Williamsburg, Va. However, belowground pipes, wires and hydraulic tubing are a different matter. Those parts usually last 20 to 25 years.

Most modern irrigation systems cost $750,000 to $1.25 million, Horton notes. "If you are putting a system on a course in the Northeast — where you get 40 to 50 inches of annual rain with half coming in the growing season — it doesn't require the same sophistication you would in the West, where you might not get any rain from March through December," Horton adds.

Foy says a "bare bones" double-row system with piping, heads, pumping station and control system runs $500,000 to $750,000. A top-of-the-line, triple-row system with piping, heads, pumping station that could only put out 600 gallons per minute. Some of the main lines were less than 3 inches in diameter. During dry times, the course relied on potable water that the city could shut off during droughts.

Kloska's initial plan called for a new irrigation system, $400,000 to $460,000; a double-row system, $320,000 to $360,000; and a triple-row system, as much as $1 million. Pumping systems, excluding pump houses and utility connections, run between $40,000 and $60,000.

Consultant or distributor designer

Once a superintendent determines a new irrigation system is necessary, there are two alternatives: Hire an independent irrigation consultant to design the system or have a manufacturer's local distributor do it.

Irrigation consultants are more expensive, with fees between $25,000 and $35,000. But they will design an irrigation system with equipment best suited to the facility. The local distributor will design the system free in exchange for the course buying that firm's equipment, which may or may not be the best choice, Buchen notes. And a local distributor may not be as skilled as an independent consultant.

A third option is to have the local distributor design the system and then send the design to the manufacturer's national office, where the manufacturer's head designers can also check the plan.

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Foy says it's best to hire outside irrigation consultants. "They are professionals," he stresses. "Irrigation systems have gotten so sophisticated, I would never feel comfortable designing a new system."

Whether an irrigation consultant or a local distributor designs the system, the superintendent should work closely with the designer on the fine points.

Selling the idea

Erik Christiansen, president of EC Design Group Ltd., an irrigation consultant located in West Des Moines, Iowa, is a former irrigation supplies distributor and superintendent who says it's not unusual for 70 percent of a green committee to initially oppose the idea of upgrading an irrigation system.

"Many think a superintendent asking for a new irrigation system is similar to his asking for a new truck with a CD player," Christiansen explains. "[Members] believe the superintendent simply wants the best for himself. Having an independent consultant make a similar request takes the superintendent out of the firing line."

Horton, who was superintendent at Winged Foot GC and Westchester CC in New York in addition to his management position at Pebble Beach, says he never inherited an up-to-date irrigation system at any of his courses, but he was successful at convincing ownership to install them. Horton laid the groundwork at Winged Foot and Westchester, which installed updated systems shortly after his departure. He upgraded the system at Pebble Beach Golf Links.

"The way to sell it is on the fact that water is a precious commodity," Horton says. "You need to demonstrate that you can manage your water in a more efficient manner with a newer irrigation system."

Foy says a superintendent rarely convinces ownership to install a new system overnight, except under extreme conditions.

"The drought this spring and early summer highlighted deficiencies quickly," he adds. "In a few cases, superintendents quickly convince ownership of the need. But it's generally a one- or two-year process."

What's the key to convincing members and owners to spend the money?

"For courses that are still dragging hoses, the owner can probably pay back his investment in labor savings in a relatively short time," Armstrong says. "Course conditioning is almost always a primary factor in a client's decision for bringing us in for renovations. Nine times out of 10, irrigation improvements are an important part of the changes we make."

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