

At public, private and resort golf courses, superintendents often find themselves forced to take machetes to their budgets and start cutting. When the money-green blood of relatively booming times suddenly turns red like the numbers of the short-term bottom line, financial types are programmed to begin telling everyone to stop spending. Golf course maintenance fits in their cross hairs squarely because it represents expenses only — not an opportunity to create revenue.

Bean counters and chicken littles fail big time when they forget that a dynamic and living golf course requires great care. Without that care, no one will play golf. (Please, perish the thought of some kind of return to the minimalism of yesteryear when goats, sheep and rabbits did the greenkeeping.)

Golfers have been spoiled by our ability to maintain amazing turfgrass. When they don't see that it's amazing anymore, they stop playing. It makes me sick, but it's a reality of the business.

Now, suddenly, superintendents are being told to stop doing the very thing that clearly makes a difference. For those of you who don't think that golfers care, you can get a dose of reality by going to any of the facilities on anyone's top-whatever list and ask golfers why they're there. They won't tell you it's because of the nice job the kitchens do with the daily soup. And they won't express their willingness to spend money because the owners increased the size of the clubhouse to have weddings and charity auctions at the pretty new golf courses.

I don't know how to answer some of the questions posed to me lately. Some are so absurdly beyond the pale that I find myself slack-jawed. There are the obvious questions, such as, "I have to decide whether it's a good idea to fertilize next year at all." But there are the unsolvable puzzles, such as, "They told me I have to decide between fuel for the machines and people on the crew and cut one or the other."

A Look at the Big Economic Picture

BY DAVE WILBER



PANIC AND POOR CHOICES RESULT IN GOLF COURSES THAT WILL HAVE TOUGH TIMES GETTING BACK UP TO SPEED

There's also the deferred maintenance roll of the dice, where a turf manager asks himself, "Do I really need to rebuild that well pump, even though it's the course's only source of water and barely made it through last season?"

Superintendents are baffled by what's going on, but not because they don't want to do their part. It's because the people throwing around the messy alternative spending schemes are in many cases successful business people who should understand that not taking care of your primary infrastructure spells disaster.

Some operations are doomed to fail. Their financial pictures are so thin that a little missed revenue causes their pro-forma cash-flow projections to read like a fantasy novel. The superintendents at these operations are probably already trying to get blood out of the turnips — and now they're being told they need the turnips to turn into wedding receptions or a holiday parties. (It's a shame that when times are good, the superintendent is the last one off the hook when the competition is doing better.)

Panic and poor choices result in golf courses that will have tough times getting back up to speed. Letting things go until things get better economically is plain stupid, and superintendents know this.

Superintendents have to fight hard, but the responsibility of stewardship comes with the unpleasant task of telling people what they don't want to hear. The golf course will speak volumes — but only after it has not gotten what it needs to prosper.

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