

Tough Crowd

BY ANTHONY PIOPPA, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

The golf course maintenance industry is taking on the appearance of a car (golfers' expectations) towing a trailer (superintendents). No matter how fast the trailer goes, it can't catch up to the car.

No matter what a superintendent does, it's just not enough. The greens may be perfect and rolling at 10 on the Stimpmeter, but nearby is a course with a green speed of 11, so 10 is deemed too slow. It's inconsequential that the course with a green speed of 11 is 2 years old with flat putting surfaces, while the one course with a green speed of 10 is 85 years old and has wilting, undulating greens that would be impossible to play at higher speeds.

Another part of the problem is also the age-old dilemma of a course trying to keep up with the Joneses even if the Joneses have the largest maintenance budget in the area and a crew the size of a cavalry division. Of course, the color television is also to blame. If only golf tournaments could be televised in black and white.

So superintendents, like the trailer, have no choice but to keep up. This brings to light a predicament that many superintendents face when forming their maintenance budgets.

A major problem with many golf courses is that budgets aren't rising at the same level as golfers' expectations for outstanding turf. So how can superintendents better communicate with golfers and members to find out the things they want and need the most? How can superintendents make it clear to golfers and members that they sometimes can't have everything they want because of budgetary limits?

No matter how tough Fred Behnke's cur-

rent bosses are now, they will never be more demanding than the golf course's previous owners. Behnke is superintendent of Mount Prospect (Ill.) Golf Club, a municipal owned by the Mount Prospect Park District. Behnke says the mob owned Mount Prospect in the 1930s and 1940s. Now that's a boss who would be tough to say "no" to.

"I keep thinking we're going to find a body or money every time we dig an irrigation trench," Behnke says with a chuckle.

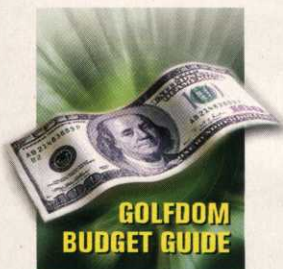
Since he has not found any cash, Behnke has to make do with the budget provided him to keep the course up to expectations, while also getting the point across to management and golfers of what's attainable and what's not.

"My boss made it clear that he's not going to tolerate what most people consider municipal conditions," Behnke says.

That's a tall order, considering that Mount Prospect's most-expensive green fees are \$46 for nonresidents on weekends. The expectations, though, are high because of so many good public layouts in the Chicago area — which Behnke says leads to an interesting phenomenon when his regulars return from one of the expensive courses. "They spent a lot more money, so they are not going to say our place is just as good," he says, even though the course just might *be* as good.

Behnke, who has been at Mount Prospect for nearly 20 years and is president of the Chicagoland Association of Golf Course Superintendents, has found that talking to golfers individually about the course's budget is the best way to communicate with them. Then they understand better why he can spend

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Budgets aren't rising at the same level as golfers' great expectations for outstanding turf. What are superintendents to do?





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BOB ALONZI
FENWAY GOLF CLUB

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money to do some things but not some others. Behnke's point is that most people — if you talk to them alone and reasonably — will be reasonable with *you*.

Behnke says another part of his job is to “act as a filtering mechanism.” Because the county runs the course, a commission oversees its operation. That means the general public can voice concerns directly to the commission. Behnke says golfers won't go over his head if he answers their queries at the golf course.

Despite his challenges, Behnke says he might have an advantage over superintendents at upscale private courses.

“My golfers are mostly middle-class,” he says. “They have heard the word ‘no’ in their lives. The guys at private clubs have it harder because they are dealing with people not used to hearing ‘no.’”

Bob Alonzi will attest to that. The superintendent at Fenway Golf Club in White Plains, N.Y., has been a superintendent in the ultra-competitive Westchester County area for more than 30 years, including a stint at Winged Foot Golf Club. According to Alonzi, one of his biggest problems over the years has been dealing with a person in a position of power — whether it is green chairman or club president — who makes decisions on his own, foregoing the normal procedure.

“It becomes very political,” Alonzi says. “You can't run the golf course for one person.”

In these situations, people used to exercising power believe they can make changes by merely passing on the dictum without thoughts of budgets or manpower. “They want to leave their mark,” Alonzi says.

Alonzi tries to combat this problem through what he calls “familiarization,” or teaching his members without making them feel like they are being taught.

“It's really getting to know the people you work for,” he says, noting that it's about carefully explaining why their wants and desires may not be realistic. “I want to communicate what it takes to achieve X, Y and Z.”

At Barefoot Resort and Golf in North Myrtle Beach, S.C., Patrick Donelan deals with one person, the director of golf, while maintaining the Greg Norman- and Davis Love-designed courses. In his previous job, Donelan was superintendent at a private facility. Then

he used hard numbers to explain to members why certain desires could never be achieved without shattering the budget.

At one point at the private course, Donelan asked the green committee to give him a wish list of what it wanted. Then he put numbers to each item to show what each would cost.

“They just about fell off their chairs,” Donelan says of the cost for some proposed projects, such as extending irrigation into the tree lines or performing landscaping projects. “They looked at me like I was nuts.”

Often times, the members who proposed the work didn't take labor issues into consideration of the potential cost, Donelan says.

One way to avoid farfetched ideas is to indoctrinate new board members. “The older guys need to help the new guys understand the superintendent's situation,” Donelan says.

He points to the fact that most freshman green committee members are surprised by the fact that 54 percent of the budget is devoted to labor.

The rules are different at Barefoot Resort. Donelan works in conjunction with his counterpart, John Hughes, superintendent of the resort's Tom Fazio-designed public course. When budget time rolls around, Donelan and Hughes work together before submitting their numbers.

At times, cuts are needed even when it appears that the leanest numbers are not enough. Donelan says he and Hughes leave it up to their bosses to make the toughest cuts. Sometimes that means not hiring as many seasonal employees or reducing the frequency of nonessential maintenance practices.

Donelan says he understands the need to save money, although he doesn't always like the cuts that must be made. But since the superintendents of Barefoot have such a good relationship with upper management, he says he knows his bosses will take the utmost care when trimming.

Alonzi said communication between the superintendent and all involved parties is the simple and appropriate path to settle budget disputes.

“The best way is to talk it over,” he says, before offering a caution. “But you have to be extremely careful.” ■