



Budget Crunch

By David Oatis, director, Northeast Region

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The 2008 season is just about in the books, and it has been a very unusual one. From the weather standpoint, July was the toughest month of the season as extreme temperatures and wildly fluctuating humidity produced tremendous stress for the turf. In direct contrast, August was one of the mildest Augusts. However, the recent downturn in the economy has produced financial stress on budgets that will likely dwarf the environmental stress on the turf. This is not to say that turf problems did not exist this year, but the recent budgetary problems have been far more significant at many courses. Options for cutting costs are routinely discussed during Turf Advisory Service visits and some courses are having to make major sacrifices just to keep the doors open.

So, where can dollars be cut from the budget? Perhaps the more important question is "where can corners NOT be cut"? A key in working through your budget dilemma is to go back to basics.

- Managing the above and below ground growing environments is essential for a successful turf management system. Thus, continue to invest in tree work and your aeration and topdressing programs. Turf grown in a poor growing environment is less reliable and more expensive to maintain. The same is true of turf that is grown in unfavorable soil environments. Cost cutting here will result in poor turf performance and much bigger costs down the road.
- The biggest part of just about every maintenance budget is labor costs, and reducing frequency of some of the more maintenance-intensive practices certainly is worth consideration. However, be sure to protect key personnel. The average golfer looks at golf course maintenance workers as just that, workers. However, it takes a significant amount of time, effort,

and cost to thoroughly train an individual to do all the tasks involved in golf course maintenance. A well-trained individual, particularly a motivated one, is a tremendous resource and one that should be protected. Well-trained and reliable employees are worth far more than their salaries might indicate. In dire circumstances, you may be better off reducing hours if that will allow you to keep more of your better employees working.

- Reducing bunker maintenance by reducing the frequency of raking is a good option for many courses to save a few dollars.
- Eliminating ornamental planters out on your course and increased use of perennials in the beds around the clubhouse both are good ways to reduce costs. Similarly, reconsider use of hedges on the course because of the labor they require to maintain.
- Use of naturalized rough areas (no-mow areas) represents an opportunity for reducing mowing costs. However, with the level of maintenance some golfers expect in naturalized rough areas, it may actually be cheaper just to mow them as normal rough. Natural areas only reduce costs if they are minimally treated (periodic weed control and an annual mowing or two).
- Green Speed - Greens obviously are the most important area of the course in terms of playability, but dialing back green speed requirements is another option to save a few dollars.
- Depending on fuel costs, increased use of growth regulators to reduce mowing frequency in large areas (bunker banks and/or fairways) is an option worth considering. In some cases, application of growth regulator combinations will provide longer term suppression and perhaps even some slight disease control.
- Fertilization - going back to the basics in terms of fertilization can save some courses hundreds, and perhaps even thousands, of dollars a year. Try using less expensive fertilizers and eliminating the use of products sold based on testimonials rather than solid scientific research.
- Reevaluate proposed course improvement projects and reassess their impact on maintenance costs. For instance, large, dramatic, and elaborate

bunker designs may have a terrific visual effect, but they also will be much more expensive to maintain. It may be time to consider whether simple mounding can accomplish the desired playability effect as opposed to more expensive and elaborate bunker designs.

Clearly, there are lots of other options for reducing costs at golf courses, and this is not intended to be an all-inclusive list by any means. For additional ideas, read "[Maintenance on a Shoestring](#)" by Pat O'Brien. Cutting back on continuing education is not a good idea. The science of managing golf courses is constantly changing, and staying up-to-date on the latest research and ideas can save money in the long run.

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