

PARK SUPERVISORS ADJUST TO FINANCIAL PRESSURES

by John Kerr



Grady Simril (right), president of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of Northern California and turfgrass specialist for East Bay Regional Park District, discusses results of recently seeded field with park manager Jim Stabler (left). A seed mixture of 80 percent tall fescue and 20 percent Manhattan ryegrass was used.



Special toilet trailers for back country campouts eliminate road damage by heavy pumpout trucks servicing out of the way latrines. The trailer carries water, barbecue pits, garbage cans, and two chemical toilets.

"Parks and recreation, to many people, is like motherhood and apple pie," says Roger Landaster, director of research, NRPA. "You really can't be against a park. But when you're in competition with other public services, such as building a school or a park, the school's going to come out on top."

This is the situation many park superintendents and directors face in a time of cut budgets and inflation. They must provide public functions and preserve beauty with limited resources. The energy shortage, which has severely cut use and revenue of state parks, has also greatly increased the demand on local parks. This causes shuffling of park staff and more work for the maintenance crews of parks near urban centers. Since there is less money, crews lose personnel and use more unskilled labor. There is less gas to run mowers and tractors. The problems punch hard at supervisors, but they are fighting back.

"We are doing maintenance for more people- and nature-related things instead of just a nice, aesthetic look," says Bob Kline, operations supervisor for the Hamilton County, Ohio, Park Department. This system in and around Cincinnati has done a study to categorize all of its parks into different animal habitats, such as grasslands,

forests, and various secessional stages. "Instead of just letting areas grow to a climax forest or mowing them as grasslands, we are thinning out saplings and maintaining the weedy growth in relation to the type of wildlife we want," Kline says.

Maintenance has been increased because the park has added 5,000 acres, but Kline thinks maintenance has actually been reduced in proportion to original park lands. "We aren't mowing as much area just to mow it," Kline says. "We now have open fields that are only mowed once every five years." More care has been taken on areas used by people, such as bike trails, horseback riding trails, and frisbee golf.

Equipment used in this park system, the second largest in Ohio, is top quality. "We are going to the most modern and best equipment on the market because labor costs are going higher and higher. We invest in this equipment and hire the people to maintain it properly and we come out ahead," Kline says. He gets the best price by giving dealers his specifications and taking bids.

Kline uses growth inhibitors around fence posts to save on trimming. He also hires people who have low skills, often through the CETA program, but the

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motivation and desire to be trained. The Hamilton County system produces its own funds through annual permits for driving through park, fishing licenses, and auctioning off old equipment at the end of the year. These economies plus only a few tax dollars have kept this self-sustaining park an attractive site for visitors.

Robert Espeseth, an outdoor recreation specialist with the office of recreation and park resources at the University of Illinois, says that in many parts of his state grounds have been studied for reduced maintenance. Mowing has been cut 25 to 30 percent in areas and fertilizing is concentrated in heavy impact spots. "In many cases, it's more pleasing to see the wildflowers and some of the natural growth than the mowed areas," Espeseth says.

Using gang mowers and large rotary mowers reduces manpower needs along with the soaring costs of unemployment insurance and workmen's compensation insurance. Spraying soil sterilants or chemicals around fences, trees, and shrubs means less hand trimming. Growth retardants and use of prairie grass, where applicable, help further decrease the amount of mowing.

Espeseth, who is also a commissioner for the Champaign County Forest Preserve District, says the Illinois park system has initiated an efficient equipment maintenance program. Every vehicle holds a card with its record of upkeep so there is no question about the last checkup. Diesel engines on equipment provide better power and economy, he says.

Illinois has a unique advantage, being divided into districts which are separate municipalities or governmental agencies that have special taxing power gives them a solid economic base. "As a result, a park district in an area doesn't have to rely on the local unit of government for financing. It can levy its own taxes up to amount that's limited by legislation," Espeseth says.

The Metropolitan Dade County, Florida, Park and Recreation Department did a study on the time it takes for every maintenance job and found that picking up litter was its biggest task. It decided to give permits to groups, like the Little League and voluntary organizations, to set up concession stands with the condition they pick up all the litter around the area.

Chief of Operations Dr. Chuck Pezoldt, reorganized the department by combining park and recreation managers into one position. He has his maintenance force divided into four levels: on-site workers, roving crews, decentralized trade crews, and reconstruction and renovation. He now puts people, who might normally be working on programs, into first level work. For example, in a pool operation, a lifeguard will do all the maintenance—vacuum the pool, wash the deck, clean the lockers, and trim the grass.

"We believe very strongly in focal point maintenance, that is, things that people look at the most should get the most maintenance," says Pezoldt. He's limiting maintenance by becoming more mechanized and forcing landscapers to cluster trees on rights-of-ways so mowers and curb dressers can move quickly. "We have a sharper appearing and better maintained median strip because of the landscape design," he says.

The Dade County system has recently included 11½ miles of beach in its 11,000 acres of park land.

A referendum may cut back some taxation. Pezoldt is considering prioritization of programs and may have to increase the amount of user fees. "A park should be something everyone is proud of. We strive to make our parks look even better than a neighborhood would look," he says.

Ralph Cryder, director of parks and recreation in Los Angeles County, faces his duties with a loss of 45 percent of his tax support over the last two years. There is no money to buy new equipment or hire a sufficient work force for the 72,000-acre system spread out over 4,000 square miles.

"We have skimmed on maintenance," Cryder says. He has tried to cluster maintenance on areas so one of the traveling crews can focus their work in certain areas. He is putting trees into turf areas and mowing high to mow less frequently, spraying chemicals around fences, and top dressing putting greens with pure sand to water less without the chance of burnout.

Since most of the equipment is at least five years old and must run year around, the park is fortunate to have an excellent repair shop, used especially for small equipment. It has its own personnel and building; only funds are lacking to keep it constantly operating.

Ray Dortch, deputy director in charge of parks, thinks the shop may be the largest of its type. It stocks 12,000 separate items of repair parts and has a 17-man repair force. Two traveling mechanics equipped for small repairs and tune-ups are kept busy in their daily runs, which extend 70 miles from headquarters. The shop and traveling crew not only save money but, more importantly, save down time.

More productive equipment—larger and more durable—and substituting rotary for reel mowers are directions the park system in Los Angeles is moving, according to Dortch. He also foresees more diesel tractors for fuel economy and durability, and more chemical control which will occur under more regulations. String-line trimmers won't hold up to more than six or seven months of constant use in southern California's long growing season.

Cryder thinks the biggest trend in government-supported parks is to contract out maintenance jobs. "We're going to farm out some of our smaller parks and one 100-acre park totally on grounds maintenance as an experiment to see if it's more cost effective," he says.

A 600-acre tree farm has been a "Godsend in terms of replacement," says Cryder. Most of the work at it is done by a 15-member juvenile crew, which also does clean up and hand labor in the park. Cryder thinks the park is also going to create a turf farm or sod nursery to replace turf on putting greens and other areas.

He has color coded all the buildings because of all the repainting needed from graffiti. Painting over graffiti is the crew's first task of the day. If he waits a week, a major paint job will demand union painters.

Another California park system that feels the pressure from Proposition 13 is the 53,000-acres of the East Bay Regional Park District. The park lost 40 percent of its income with passage of the act last June, says Christian Nelson, chief of parks and interpretation. He says the park district is asking industry, which is now saving tax dollars, to con-

sider adopting a park or a project in a park as part of a rebate.

Kaiser Aluminum & Chemical Corp., based in Oakland, has adopted the Roberts Regional Recreation Area in the Oakland Hills, a favorite spot of barbecuers, hikers, and scenery gazers. Kaiser Aluminum donated money and its staff for a Big Toy playground. The firm then paid the public bus system to extend its service into the park and give free rides to all children.

This park district is studying with the University of California on an integrated pest management program on some of the insects in trees, especially fruit trees, which the park inherited with new acquisitions. "We are trying to restrict the use of chemicals and someday eliminate them all together," says Nelson.

His crew designed and built a mini pump-out truck out of ¾-ton truck bed so that they could pump chemical toilets out without ruining paths and roads. "That, in the long run, is going to save us hundreds of thousands of dollars, because the roads will last without that 1,500-gallon truck going in and out all the time."

They have also developed portable chemical toilet trucks that carry two chemical toilets, two garbage cans, barbecue pits, and a supply of water. Groups that wish to have a special camp-out, like a horse trail ride in the back country, can now be accommodated with a vehicle called a "booney buggy." The party can use the vehicle in deep woods for a small fee and then drop it off when they're finished.

Although finding enough money for worthy projects is a constant battle, a park superintendent strives for functional innovations to make his park a better site. Jeffrey Bourne, chief, bureau of parks, department of recreation and parks, Howard County, Md., is beginning some projects which may not produce revenue but will make great improvements on his park lands.

Bourne's park department is working with a local environmental services department on a program utilizing sewage sludge in landfill. Presently, the two are spreading liquid sludge or dry treated solids on undeveloped areas to upgrade organic matter which is laden with clay. A recently purchased 800-acre site, 600 acres of which will be used for landfill, will be progressively developed for recreational facilities.

On the site, a planned sludge composting and treatment facility, using bulk brush, chips, and other materials, will make part of a top dressing mix for turf areas and a compost available to the homeowner. It may not be a commercial operation for a while, but it will help utilize what will soon be 70 dry tons of sewage a day from the local sewage plant. "We're looking at it more as a savings as opposed to producing revenue," Bourne says. "Here's a resource we can make use of on a regular yearly basis and it's simply being buried."

Bourne is also considering developing turf on athletic fields, which are in short supply, through what he calls a "forced growth method." It involves experimenting with a portable greenhouse installed 8 inches high over a football or soccer field that has been mulched and seeded and growing grass through solar heat in the winter time. Bourne says, "We may find that we can force grow grass on a football field and in the spring take the cap off

and have a turf that's substantial enough to support play the following fall. If we do a renovation we'll close the field for 18 months to allow the turf to mature."

The 8-inch-high greenhouse will probably be built with a lattice wood frame on 8-inch centers and capped with clear poly sheeting with ventilating holes across. "What we're doing to some extent, is creating a solar collector by tapping the dirt," Bourne says. "We hope the dirt's color will absorb the sunlight, keep the soil warm, get the germination pushed up faster, and then will act as a shield to allow the grass plants to grow during the winter."

Bourne stands opposite to superintendents who are contracting out their work, although he does borrow and share equipment with other county agencies. "We try to limit, as much as possible, work by outside contractors, because we feel we have much better control and management of our projects if we're doing the work." He makes his own soil material for baseball infields with a shredder/grinder/mixer and adds crushed mix or vitrified clay to tailor the mix to the site.

A recently purchased rock picker greatly reduces the manual labor to clean up fields. Where it used to take a four or five man crew a week to walk an entire soccer field and pick rocks by hand, it now takes two men only one day.

Because of the high amount of youngsters who play in Howard County's 2,300 acres, Bourne limits his use of herbicides and pesticides. "We have decided that we are going after healthy, vigorous turf through more natural means—aeration, closely monitored mowing, fertilization, and use of the sludge."

The park system often uses the local state property surplus agencies. Through them, it purchased a late sixties Toro Roadmaster seven-gang reel mower for \$600 and has also picked up smaller mowers, trucks, hardware, and office furnishings.

"Maintenance is a function of design," says Fred Galle, vice president and director of horticulture at Callaway Gardens, Pine Mountain, Ga. "In the design, if maintenance is given consideration, it can be worked out." Along with aiding maintenance, the design can also help prevent vandalism, Galle thinks.

It is a challenge to make a park attractive and educational, according to Galle, and still stay within a budget. A number of cities have their own nurseries which could supply plants, but many parks don't use them. Galle thinks the quality may be better and the price actually cheaper to buy seedlings from a commercial nursery. It is a good consideration to buy discriminately because there are many sellers of the same materials.

Doug Dalby, superintendent of park maintenance and special facilities for the Wheeling Park Commission at Oglebay Park, West Virginia, works with a totally self sustaining park. He thinks the most important way of holding down costs is to hire lots of part-time help, especially students, and keep a small permanent staff through the winter. Unskilled and semi-skilled employees willing to be trained are his best prospects.

Being self supporting means makes the Oglebay Park crew look closely at what costs money and what returns money. Revenue-producing facilities

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ties, such as restaurants and lodging; plus sports, such as golf, boating, and tennis, are watched and carefully maintained. "We have enough things that produce money to offset what doesn't make it—our gardens, displays, and greenhouses," Dalby says.

Dalby is also a member of the board of regents for Maintenance-Management School, a two-week course held every winter at Oglebay Park. Conducted by North Carolina State University in cooperation with the National Recreation and Park Association, the course deals in all aspects of park maintenance from planning and organizing to supervising personnel.

A seminar every year at the Great Lakes Park Training Institute in Angola, Indiana, also deals with park maintenance subjects. Topics concern whatever is pertinent at the time, and have recently included better use of growth retardants, mowing, and better use of manpower materials. This five-day program is conducted by the Department of Recreation and Park Administration at Indiana University.

For more information on the Park and Recreation Maintenance Management School, contact Alice Strickland, North Carolina State University, Div. of Continuing Education, Post Office Box 5125, Raleigh, NC 27650. 919/737-2261.

For additional information on the Great Lakes Park Training Institute, contact Dr. Richard Lawson, Indiana University, HPER bldg. Room 133, Bloomington, IN 47405. 812/337-4711. **WTT**

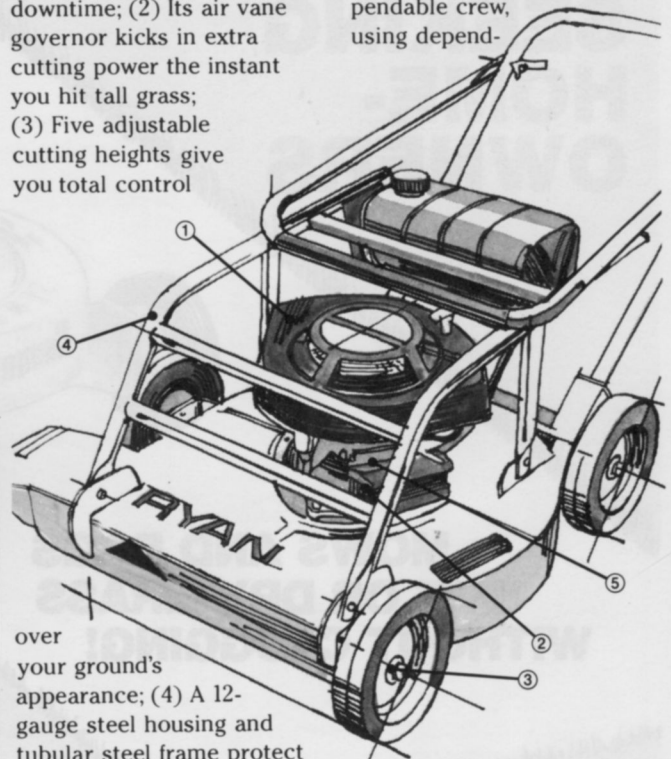
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