

Club members' fears a major obstacle

BY MARK LESLIE

Pride. Fear and anxiety. Defensiveness and stubbornness.

The tradition of a golf course is embodied in its members. They are the ones who, first, must be convinced that renovating their course is necessary; and, second, kept involved in the project as they see their beloved greens and fairways dug into by bulldozers.

Speaking of older members at courses designed by "masters" of the craft, architect Brian Silva said, "I'm pretty sure you could kidnap one of their children and get away with less compensation than if you changed one of their greens."

Robert Muir Graves tells people at design seminars: "The most critical communication procedure during actual remodeling and renovation work is to let the players know what's going on ahead of time.

"During that same period, perhaps the most critical construction procedure is to create good temporary tees and greens as required. The better they play the less complaints you get."

Club members can be an obstacle or a help—sometimes both.

Florida architect Robert Walker said mem-

bers at San Jose Country Club in Jacksonville were divided. Older ones didn't want their Donald Ross-designed course touched. Younger ones, wanting a modern flair and better quality turf, felt, "Let's blow this place up or sell it and go some place else; or we're leaving," according to Walker.

Finally, it was a progressive stroke by Greens Committee Chairman Thomas Brown that sold the entire membership on remodeling.

Brown hired a marketing consultant and put on a series of presentations to members in groups of 150 to 200.

The illustrated presentation showed the course's problems, "not only in terms of aesthetics and physical draining and irrigation ... but the playability problems—how we could take care of all those things with a complete renovation," Walker said.

Walker then encouraged members to get involved.

"Some of the most outspoken members would come out to the course and ask why we were doing certain things... In fact, before we broke ground, I got all the members to come in and talk about golf course design," Walker said.

"Some were really concerned that we were

going to do waste bunkers and steep slopes.

"We asked for their input. They felt involved and offered input. Some of the things they wanted were incorporated into the final plan."

Walker also got the women involved.

"They knew they needed ladies' tees and the ladies' course to play at 5,000 yards," Walker said. "But the good lady players were upset. They didn't want their handicaps to go down... So we built red tees that play 4,900 to 5,000 yards. Another set of tees plays at 5,500 to 5,600 yards. The rest can be jockeyed to play at 6,100, 6,300 or 6,625."

Walker said the most important thing was that members "felt better about what we were doing. They knew I wasn't a fan of this contemporary style of architecture. They knew we weren't going to build acres of waste bunkers, step ladders down into pot bunkers, and some of the wild stuff that they didn't want to see.

"That particular style wouldn't fit on this particular piece of ground, which is more like a park."

The problem of playing time while the course was closed was solved by the club making a deal with a new course nearby. San

Jose structured a monthly fee arrangement for its members to use the course.

That kind of commitment and involvement by members is crucial, especially in long-range master plan improvement programs, according to Graves.

Says Graves: "The biggest failure we have observed of the master plan program is lack of commitment by the club officials and staff to keep the program going.

It is particularly troublesome when we have all agreed to certain basic development concepts, such as green or bunker characteristics, and along comes a new president or chairman who dumps the whole process and instigates his own, possibly misguided ideas.

"Continuity and commitment are critical."

The job: At times challenging, at times frustrating

BY MARK LESLIE

It can be frustrating and demanding, but renovating a golf course is an enjoyable task for many who undertake the challenge.

"I've been real fortunate in that I've gotten to do a lot of historical courses," said architect John LaFoy of Taylors, S.C. "For example, I'm now completely redoing the Country Club of Charleston (S.C.), which claims to be the oldest golf club in United States. The club was built in 1786 and the course was built in the 1920s by Seth Raynor. It's a great old golf course."

LaFoy, who is also remodeling Donald Ross's East Course at the Country Club of Birmingham (Ala.), said: "When you can do those types of courses, it's fun. That's one reason I like doing it. It exposes me to the real fine older golf courses."

Brian Silva, of Cornish & Silva in Whitinsville

and Amherst, Mass., said, "I really enjoy renovation work."

Saying it's "part of an architect's debt to society to do renovation work," Silva added: "Back in the mid-'70s when things were slow, every architect was writing articles about long-range plans and telling clubs how important they are. Now that it's busy three-fourths of us won't return phone calls because there's not enough money in long-range plans and renovation. I don't think that's a correct thing to do."

Atlantic Beach, Fla., architect Robert Walker said renovation work is "a lot more complex than building a new golf course. There's so much more to consider."

Walker said that in addition to the actual golf course questions, the club has to decide: "What happens to your maintenance crew? Are you going to let them all go, or are you going to keep them intact? Are you going to make them

construction workers? What happens to your food and beverage personnel, and your pro shop people?"

San Jose Country Club in Jacksonville, Fla., put the maintenance crew to work, teaching them to build a golf course.

"We put a lot of those guys on equipment and one of them turned out to be a super shaper. I'd offer him a job on one of my courses any time," Walker said.

Silva agreed it is more difficult to renovate than build a new course.

"Permits are difficult on a new job," he said. "But ... renovation is the ultimate in a thankless job. I believe that the best renovation job in the world gets 50-percent approval. Twenty percent aren't going to like it because you spent money. Fifteen percent aren't going to like it because they don't like the (club) president that year."

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