

Make course renovations legitimate, Ault says

By MARK LESLIE

DALLAS — Keeping up with the Joneses by renovating your golf course is a mistake made too often in the golf industry, according to architect Brian Ault.

Speaking at the GCSAA conference, Ault spelled out when to and when not to renovate: "No matter what club you're employed at, public or private, some day renovations to some extent are going to be in your future." He suggested that "at the

proper time" superintendents should initiate steps to renovation "rather than have the green chairman wake you up and tell you it's time."

A principal in the firm Ault, Clark and Associates in Maryland, Ault said some golf clubs jump too quickly into the mechanics of renovating their courses.

"Because your course is old doesn't automatically mean it's out of style," he said. "On the other hand, some members want

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to reinstall some of the older features and return their golf course to that style of yesteryear. You can't arbitrarily say that's the thing to do, either. Placing bunkers where they were originally designed 30, 40, 50 years ago isn't necessarily best. They won't come into play as much as they did originally, and you're liable to end up with a mixed match of old and new."

Meanwhile, many golfers don't like their courses disturbed, he

said, adding that members, especially, are "firm believers in 'If it's not broke, don't fix it.'"

That ambivalence is evident among superintendents as well, Ault said. "Some of you are enthusiastic about renovations. You want to participate, to show off some of your other skills besides growing grass. For others, it conjures up an image of unwanted disruptions and additional work—an unwanted jolt to the status quo."

Maintenance problems and inadequacies in character, image or playability can all justify renovations, Ault said. "But if you are going to fix it, do it efficiently with a minimum of disturbance, and fix it right the first time," he said.

Among Ault's list of "legitimate reasons" to renovate are:

- Over extended periods of time, mow lines can change — some to the point that the greens are round and losing pin placement areas.
- Trees mature. Areas once in a reasonable amount of sunlight and air circulation are now under shade, with roots encroaching and no wind. "On the other hand, trees mature and die. Taking out trees affects golf as much as newer ones growing in."
- Sand in bunkers can migrate through wind, mechanical rakes and golfers blasting shots out of them.
- Some older courses are seeing the effects of increased play where smaller greens and tees can no longer be adequately maintained.
- Courses need to improve speed of play to increase rounds.
- Safety problems are being experienced at some courses. "Tees are too close to greens. Fairways are side by side... Golf courses are being sued all the time. Safety is very, very important to architects. As superintendents, you should also be concerned."

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"Whether a private or public course, you have to stay competitive. That has a lot to do with improving or ensuring the aesthetics, image and character of your facility are the best they can be," Ault said.

He described the chronology of the renovation process:

- Identify the problem, categorize it, understand its cause and your objectives.
- Analyze it and perhaps prepare a report with support information. "You have to go up the chain of command and sell your need. That takes materials like photographs, a soils report, a check by a USGA agronomist."
- You and club members must decide if the problems need a one-time fix. "Or, if you're having a series of similar problems, you must recognize consistency in fixing these problems is required."
- Hire an architect who submits a proposal of services and fees to

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Course renovations sometimes unnecessary

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handle your problems. He will also bring a level of consistency to the renovations.

- Inform membership about the plans.

- The architect meets with a team. "We want to discuss the problem with you for maintenance- and design-type problems, and with the pro from the standpoint of playability. Typically, a club member is also involved."

- Perform thorough site reviews.

- The conceptual design phase begins here: Analyze each problem or concern and formulate recommended design solutions.

- Cost estimates. "It's here superintendents must decide the extent of their involvement. Can you operate a back hoe? Are you willing to operate a back hoe? Are you willing to provide materials, to lay sod or sand in the bunkers. Or, as many superintendents do, feel it is above and beyond, especially because the project will take place at a critical time of the year for them. Their budget and manpower is not sufficient.

"Again, sell it up through the chain of command. The architect needs to sell it. He has concept plans. He knows what will be rebuilt. He knows how much the club and contractor are going to do, how much it will cost, how long it will take."

- Once budgeted, the project goes to construction.

"Plan ahead and don't rush into anything hastily or for the wrong reasons," Ault warned. "Most all the time, a professional golf course architect should be selected. Don't play architect. Don't overstep your limits. If for no other reason, you should bring in an architect to take the burden of responsibility off your shoulders."

At the same time, he said: "This isn't brain surgery. We don't have to over-engineer it."

The more a superintendent contributes to assuring the proper criteria are met, Ault said, "the more of a professional and valued asset you will be to your employer."

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