

BY MARISA PALMIERI

Spreading it out

The ability to purchase a new irrigation control system over three years was the key to Southern Hills' upgrade

For Russ Myers, CGCS, when it comes to irrigation software, it's all about flexibility. The golf course superintendent at the private, 27-hole Southern Hills Country Club in Tulsa, Okla., is in the midst of a three-year transition to a new irrigation control system.

"The key to any new irrigation system, for me, is flexibility," says Myers, who selected the

Toro Network VP Satellite, which is backward compatible with the facility's 15-year-old Network 8000 series.

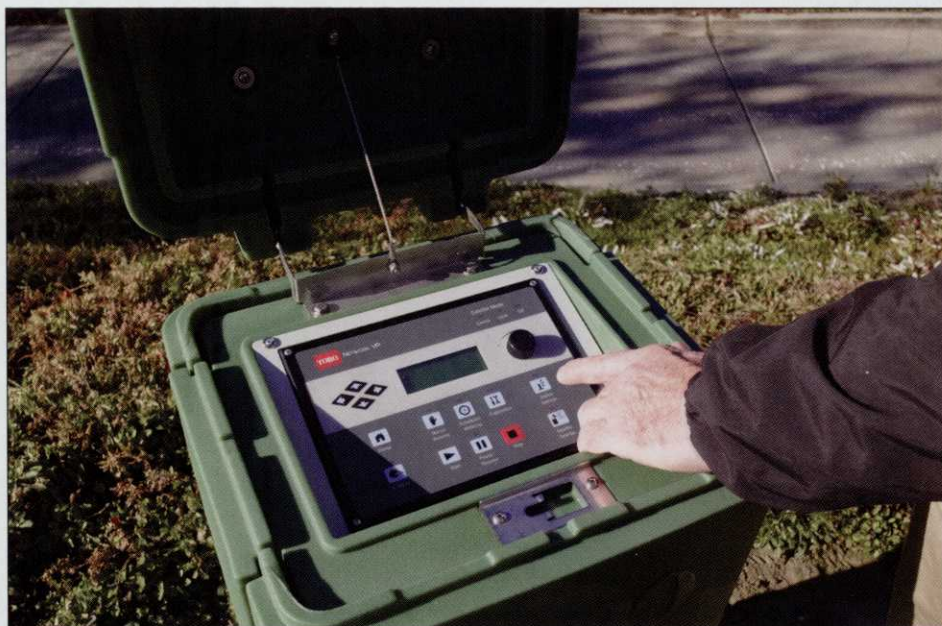
For Southern Hills, "flexible" means retaining parts of the old control system while spanning the upgrade over several years, having the ability to operate the system various ways and relying on manufacturer support.

FROM OLD TO NEW

Myers was able to stretch Southern Hills' irrigation control system upgrade over three years thanks to the systems' ability to interface with each other. This was critical to Myers' decision to use the Network VP because his reason for upgrading wasn't that the old system was ineffective. He didn't necessarily need to



The greatest benefit of Southern Hills' new Network VP irrigation system is the fact it's backward compatible to the facility's 15-year-old Network 8000 system, according to Russ Myers, CGCS. Photo: Southern Hills



With a new system, irrigation maintenance costs at Southern Hills will be cut in half. Photo: Toro

make an upgrade, but because of increasing costs to maintain the old system, the facility's long-range capital investment plan and the ability to make a smooth multiyear transition, he felt it was the right time.

"The Network 8000 is working fine for us, we just have a few satellites with more age on them than others," he says.

Because of this, Myers made the call not to upgrade the entire control system – with a \$120,000 price tag – all in one year.

"It makes no sense to put that kind of capital investment into one year when you can spread it out over three," he says. "But if the new Network VP wasn't going to interact with the old Network 8000, then we would have had to change it all in one year."

Having to change the whole system in one year would have been a difficult call for Myers to make, he says, because such a big one-time investment could hinder projects in the pipeline from receiving approval by the board of directors. A three-year plan is easier for the board to swallow and allows Myers to push other capital projects through concurrently.

"If I had to spend \$120,000 this year on irrigation, something else might have gotten postponed," he says. "We need flexibility in our ability to water but also in our ability to get projects moving. When you have a bunker renovation in one hand and an irrigation transition in the other, and you have to do

them both full bore, one of them is going to have to take a back seat. But because of the interchangeability Toro included in the software, we have the ability to get started on the irrigation system and benefit from it sooner."

COST CUTTING

One of the new system's main benefits is a maintenance cost reduction.

"We've only had this software for 15 years, and we could continue to use the system we have, but we can upgrade and reduce maintenance costs and stay ahead of the curve," Myers says.

Myers estimates Southern Hills spends \$18,000 a year – out of a \$2 million to \$2.5 million annual maintenance budget – on irrigation system maintenance costs and attributes about half of that to the aging satellites that are part of the central control system. Next year, after the upgrade is complete, he expects to eliminate the satellite repairs and reduce overall irrigation maintenance costs to about \$8,000 or \$9,000.

Additionally, maintenance costs will shrink because the new system requires fewer satellites, thus, there will be fewer mechanical failures requiring maintenance.

The old Network 8000 system required about two satellites per hole plus units for practice areas. There will be 46 satellites serving the facility's 300 acres after the transition to the Network VP system. Though it's difficult

to calculate a return on investment for an irrigation control system because savings come from a number of areas, including reduced maintenance costs and increased efficiency, Myers expects the ROI will spread out over the system's lifespan, which is about 15 years.

ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Another aspect of the Network VP system that sold Myers is the flexibility of running it.

"I can do it by standing at the satellite and running it, using the wireless radio or from my home computer," he says. "For me, the more flexibility there is the better off we are. In our climate, it can get to 105 degrees in the summer, and we can't afford to miss a night cycle because our irrigation software isn't functional. Having the flexibility to go to the individual satellites and bypass the central if we need to is key."

Because irrigation software is so advanced – typically offering more features than most superintendents take advantage of – simplicity and ease of use were important factors in Myers' decision to choose the system.

"When I want to turn on a specific head at one location over 300 acres of property, at the very least, I should be able to find that head and turn it on," he says. "To me, it's about whether I can sit down a guy who doesn't work with that central software daily and have him figure out how to run it easily and not have to make five phone calls to figure it out."

On the other hand, if one of Myers' crew members needs to make a phone call, he knows who to contact. Southern Hills' maintenance staff includes 33 year-round and about 17 peak-season employees.

"The biggest thing is Toro's national support network, where, if I have any problems or a failure, I can have anyone on my staff call or I can call and be back online within 24 hours," Myers says. **GCI**

More online

➤ For advice about purchasing central control systems from superintendent Brian Lentz at Lakewood Ranch Golf & Country Club in Sarasota, Fla., visit golfcourseindustry.com, scroll to the bottom of the home page and click on the November issue's online extras.

