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EXAMINING BUDGET

**The impact of 2009 cuts and
the ramifications for 2010. See pg 16.**

PLUS: Is zero-based budgeting the answer? See pg 21.





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For many of you, calling 2009 a "tough year" is an understatement.

That's why this month's cover package attempts to provide some perspective on budgets, as well as suggest an intriguing new perspective for compiling your 2010 budget.

This year many of you – some for the first time – had to determine how you were going to operate at an acceptable level with an average 10 to 15 percent reduction in your maintenance budget. Similar budget reductions are on 2010's horizon, as well.

In fact, according to recent Golf Course Industry research, nearly 65 percent of golf course superintendents indicated they had their budgets slashed in 2009. And of those cuts, more than 84 percent of superintendents indicated those cuts came at the expense of personnel.

In the wake of these budget reductions, many of you whom I talked to throughout the year said you were doing the best you could and would make it through 2009 with the limited resources at your disposal. And while economists have declared an end to this devastating recession, no one expects the road to recovery to be devoid of a few bumps and potholes.

This presents a unique problem that, if it hasn't already, will test your management skills in the coming year. Many of your team members who survived the first round of budgetary bloodletting were left with a mix of feelings and emotions. At the forefront was the elation that they still had their jobs during this time of record unemployment. But over time this devolves into a sense of frustration and emotional fatigue. What's left is the perception that, at least for the foreseeable future, everyone must do much more with much less, and are powerless to do anything about it.

Be warned. This is a dangerous, emotional quagmire for any team to fall into.

Recently, I discussed this problem with Jon Gordon, a management consultant and author

of the book "The Goldfish and The Shark."

Gordon says feelings of fear and impotence keep even the best teams from working to their highest potential. Instead, their energies become scattered and the foundation of principles they once focused on crumbles, impacting quality.

"You can tell when someone has become disengaged by the way they act," Gordon says. "Are they complaining and blaming others? When people feel powerless they complain and blame more and it's a symptom that they may have checked out."

Sound familiar?

"You've got to rally your team together," Gordon says. "You need to be very transparent and open and say to your people: 'Here's where we were. Here's where we are, and here's where we're going.'"

A unifying vision provides your team a focal point, Gordon says, and it's something they can grab hold of as they ride out the bumpy road to recovery. Most importantly, Gordon says this vision needs to outline the role each team member will play.

"Drill this down into them," he says. "Ask them how they

can contribute to this vision to move your operation forward. Then, tell them you're going to help them achieve this shared vision. The most important thing is to empower every member of your team and show them how they can be a part of the solution."

While your 2010 budget is the financial framework for your maintenance strategy, devising or revisiting your strategic objectives for your course, sharing these goals with your team and outlining their roles will go a long way toward keeping everyone engaged and oblivious to some of the bumps in the road ahead. GCI



Mike Zawacki Editor

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EDITORIAL

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Moving and Shaping

From time to time, I get calls from engineering firms offering to "do my grading plans." I politely decline as I just can't separate grading from golf course design. And I wouldn't want to – "design" is about 10 percent of the business, and I do the other support work just to feel that thrill of "pure creation" occasionally.

I typically draw extensive grading plans for projects requiring public bids. Detailed plans allow accurate bidding and layout, but they do have some downsides – Golf course architects have no equal when it comes to changing their minds, and drawing 18 holes of plans over a few weeks to "get them out the door" usually results in repetitive design. It's better to "noodle" on designs over longer periods, and the best courses are typically built this way.

Since I was collaborating with Notah Begay III, and trying to build a great course, I emphasized more "face time" with shapers at Firekeeper, since the field is the best place to finalize green contouring and bunker placement.

One advantage of partnering with Landscapes Unlimited is that they don't need detailed plans on a gently rolling site like Firekeeper. I drew plans for all greens, a few unusual tees, the lake, and the three major fairway cuts. Most other features, such as subtle fairway shaping to move drainage and framing the hole, were simply sketched in and then discussed with the shapers prior to and during shaping.

The "field approach" requires the contractors trust that I wouldn't add last minute Sahara-sized bunkers that weren't in the budget. In addition, I needed to commit to being on site whenever needed, and inexpensive air fares made frequent, "last minute" site visits financially feasible, and cell phones and e-mailed pictures were used for reviews between visits.

Firekeeper was blessed with nearly perfect golf terrain and the absence of expensive rocky and wet soils. Most earthmoving is comprised of scraper hauls and localized, balanced (none hauled in or out) bulldozer cuts and fills.

About 90,000 cubic yards of scraper hauls came from the lake and three major fairway cuts. The cost of scraper dirt varies with the length of the haul. If we can haul cuts within the same hole or adjacent holes, it's very cost effective. Longer hauls slow down the process and add cost. The design placed the irrigation lake in the southeast corner of the property, only close to the southern end of holes 12-17. Landscapes Unlimited opted to place much of the lake cut on the 15th fairway to avoid long hauls, which required some field redesign of both that fairway and other greens where I anticipated hauls to be made.

Making such field adjustments is not uncommon and often results in better designs. Greens built with only localized bulldozer cuts and fills are less expensive and usually result in a more natural look. More importantly, working with the land provides a more unique green, built to fit its site, rather than a green that could have been built nearly anywhere else.

After bulk earthmoving, the shapers craft the "magic" we all love about golf courses. I can't stress enough how important shapers are to the quality of any project, and how important it is for the shapers and architects to be on the same page. Frankly, the shapers have to "get it" for our vision to be implemented.

When it works out the way it did at Firekeeper, it's nearly the perfect world – create a good product and have fun doing it.

That "10 percent pure creation" thrill was alive and well in Kansas for the Firekeeper design and construction team. **GCI**

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Over the next few months, Jeff Brauer's column will detail the ins and outs of his experiences participating in the design and construction of a new golf course in Mayetta, Kan.

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BOOST PERFORMANCE WITH MINIMAL RESOURCES

Times are tough and you're probably not going to get that new irrigation system this year. But let's pretend that you just received a budget windfall – a 5-percent goose in capital funds over last year without any foreseeable increase in expenses. It's not a huge chunk, but an opportunity for upgrades.

Your turf maintenance equipment is in pretty good shape, so you've elected to dedicate the entire lump to irrigation. Finally, those recurring hotspots that show up on your approaches and collars can be more permanently addressed. Where to begin?

Most irrigation consultants will suggest you begin, well, at the beginning. Where can you make the most effective and logical upgrades with limited funds that will affect the long-term performance of your irrigation system – and therefore your golf course? What single irrigation system component could yield the greatest results for your turf management program?

EVALUATE AND PONTIFICATE

You dust off your irrigation master plan that was tucked away for such an occasion and know exactly where to go based on system age, wear and overall performance. When considering new features, look toward your control systems first. Pump controls and a central/satellite upgrade can offer new heights of system control that will deliver efficiencies from the piping system to the base of the sprinklers.

Upgraded pump controls and logic can enable you to use your entire system more efficiently by maximizing your pump curves through the optimization of your hydraulic tree in each irrigation set, while keeping your main and laterals filled and pressurized more consistently. This is a significant

move, so unless you're adept at reading pump curves and familiar with the technology, bringing in an outside professional might be in order.

Pump controls also should be considered if you wish to add an injection system to your irrigation set-up. Most superintendents find it cost effective to apply gypsum, wetting agents or other water-enhancing products through their irrigation systems in small, digestible increments, head by head.

Golf courses, particularly muni courses, take tremendous abuse throughout the season. Healthy root growth is important to turf's durability and resilience, so by injecting more frequently you can quickly rehabilitate stressed turf areas without worrying about manual product applications. Moreover, if you're dealing with water or soil pH problems, these tools, along with turf moisture/pH sensors can help establish and maintain the desired balance.

looking at features. As a rule, if you upgrade your field satellites, always select a model that offers more stations than you currently need. For any golf project, future system expansion is inevitable.

Some sites might lend themselves to remote-control capabilities. Activating and programming irrigation from any point on the site can save precious time and eliminate grief, especially when troubleshooting irrigation systems or syringing. Larger facilities with multiple functions will find remote control capabilities particularly helpful.

There are both universal and brand-specific remote control products out there that put power in your hand. Remote control capabilities are one of the more practical upgrades, and at the same time they're amazing time savers. Those who have them vow never to go without again – most state their handheld remote is the equivalent to additional staff.

Where can you make the most effective upgrades **with limited funds** that will affect the long-term performance of your system?

BRAIN POWER

As it relates to controls, it may be time to graduate to a new, digital, solid-state irrigation control system.

Newer controllers are affordable and offer more features than most water managers are willing to use. But most manufacturers offer modularized features, so you can pick and choose your desired functions without buying the total package.

There's a wide selection of control systems available to you. Again, consult your master plan and consider all of your site's needs before you start

These are only a few opportunities on the list to improve irrigation performance. Any upgrade that significantly affects system delivery and pressure – adding or changing sprinkler heads, zones, pump controls and so forth – needs to be carefully evaluated and accurately specified, so ensure you have access to an expert. If you ever get that budget bump, be ready. Need another good reason to properly plan for such an occasion? The green committee may only give you a short window to act and then the dollars could disappear. **GCI**

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LOYALTY IS THE ANSWER, NOT DISCOUNTING

The Strativity Group's 2009 Customer Experience Consumer Study is revealing for the golf industry, says Ben Fowler, PGA, golf facility research and consulting sales manager for the National Golf Foundation. This study shows that the No. 1 way to grow a business is by increasing customer loyalty.

"By growing your customer loyalty, your golf business will benefit through decreased customer churn, the ability to charge higher prices than your competitors and increased wallet share," Fowler says. "Clearly, the empirical evidence demonstrating the link between customer loyalty and profits is a compelling case."

The study reveals:

- **52 percent** of dissatisfied customers, or detractors, expect discounts of 5 percent or more to continue doing business with a company; no loyal customers expect discounts. Consumers are very clear about what they are seeking from the experiences companies deliver: quick and effective issue resolution, common sense and discretion, employees who exceed expectations, and ease/simplicity.
- More than **70 percent** of consumers surveyed indicate that they are willing to spend 10 percent or more with businesses if those businesses exceed their expectations.
- Loyal customers, or promoters, are almost **three times as likely** to expect to continue doing business with companies for another 10 years or more than dissatisfied customers.
- Dissatisfied customers are **10 times more likely** to expect to withdraw in the next twelve months than their loyal counterparts.
- **40 percent** of loyal customers said that they are willing to pay 10 percent or more to continue purchasing from companies delivering great experiences, in contrast with **9 percent** of dissatisfied customers. GCI

Source: Strativity. This information originally appeared in a post on Fowler's blog, "Driving Growth Through Customer Loyalty" at voiceofcustomerguru.wordpress.com.



➔ **DETRACTORS ARE 10 TIMES MORE LIKELY TO CEASE DOING BUSINESS WITH COMPANIES WITHIN THE NEXT YEAR THAN PROMOTERS ARE.**

➔ **52%** of detractors say that they will continue doing business with a company only if they offer a discount of 5 percent or more. Conversely, promoters not only don't require a discount, they responded that they will pay more. **IN FACT, 40%** of promoters said they would pay 10 percent or more to continue doing business with the companies that they are loyal to.

➔ **MORE THAN 70%** of customers responded that if the business exceeds their expectations they are willing to spend 10 percent or more with them. Source: Strativity



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Monroe Miller is a retired golf course superintendent. He spent 36 years as superintendent at Blackhawk Country Club in Madison, Wis. Miller can be reached at groots@charter.net.

THE NATIONAL

My heart is heavy these last days of 2009, unusual for a guy who loves this time of the year. It was always too early to worry about winter injury or snow mold infection, and the upcoming golf season is months away, giving me days of relative normalcy.

It is also the season when we would make plans to travel to the National, or the Golf Industry Show in today's parlance. Usually several of us traveled together to the show city and we had a lot of fun choosing hotels, travel modes, rental cars and routes, pre-conference seminars, seminars and daily schedules during the week.

I have always referred to it as the National. Many my age are guilty of the misnomer as I am. It took a long time to call it the GCSAA Conference and Show, so you can imagine how often I speak about the GIS.

Starting with Boston in 1973 through New Orleans in 2008, I didn't miss a single National. The event was an annual highlight of my career for all those years. I always viewed it as a great privilege my club provided me with, and I took it seriously. Members would ask if I was going to any golf meetings over the winter, and I would launch into an extensive narrative about the National. Too often they would think I was headed on a boondoggle, undoubtedly because that is exactly what winter meetings in a warm climate meant to them. But it was most assuredly not that to me.

The fact is the National is all about education. There is nothing like it in the world of golf when it comes to keeping current on the science that is so essential to a successful golf course operation. The same is true for new products and new machinery. We are given the chance to attend seminars taught by the best turf faculty in the

country. We can listen to America's great golf course architects speak about course design and our best builders talk about the latest in construction techniques. And it was the one time of the year to see all of the Green Section staff together at once, and to attend their national conference as a part of ours.

I have always been inspired by the show, acres of turf equipment and those responsible for bringing them to us. If you didn't get answers from the show floor, you probably couldn't get those answers anywhere.

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For many who attend, the National is like an alumni reunion. Students graduate from a turf program, scatter across the country and don't have many opportunities to see one another. Except at the National. Those collegiate friendships are renewed and strengthened at least once a year.

A lot of relationships made in the business over the decades and treasured greatly are renewed each year at the National, too. I could hardly wait to see Don Hearn and Mel Lucas, Joel Jackson and Mike Vogt and Peter Salinetti and dozens of others; I loved getting caught up on their lives and families and careers. Time spent with them at the National was precious time with true friends, time not available any other way or any more often than at the National.

The National gave me the chance to

see nearly all of America's great cities, and I enjoyed that so much. Some are surprised when I say my favorite conference cities were Boston, Washington, D.C. and San Francisco. San Diego was pretty good, too.

Where else but at the National would a person like me get the chance to meet and visit with America's greatest golfers, some of America's leaders, and a few of our bravest heroes? The Old Tom Morris Awards and the keynote speakers did that for me and thousands like me. It was wonderful!

Even though I am retired, I could still attend. But there is one small detail – nowadays I travel on my own dime. Some colleagues did that over the years of their career, and do I ever respect them for that now that I find myself in those circumstances. I appreciate my employer's generosity even more. It simply doesn't make sense for me to travel to the West Coast this year for the National, other than for sentimental reasons. Retirement has a set of sensibilities.

I'm still going to think about the people I so enjoyed. I'll wonder who is signing books at the bookstore, and think about what is new with the GCSAA staff who I have known for so long. I will wish Cheryl and I were headed to the "Dell" for lunch and then a drive over the mountains for a day or two in Palm Springs. I won't be able to hear Judy Rankin speak, and I will miss the chance to kick some tires on the show floor. The Wisconsin Hospitality Room will go on, and it will be a great evening.

Already I am thinking beyond this upcoming February and planning for February 2011. The National will return to Orlando, and for me that is a short drive.

I promise myself I will be there for that one. **GCI**

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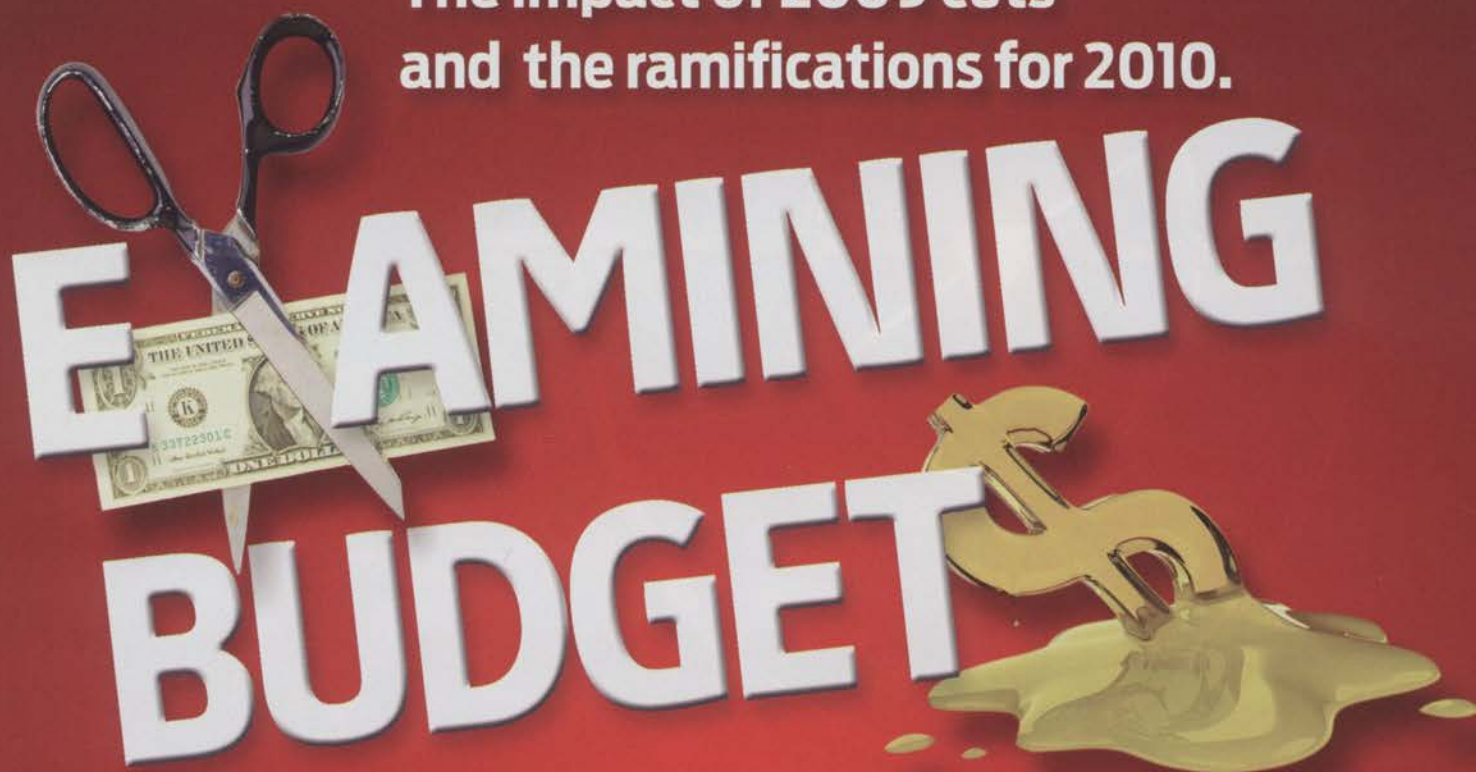
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The impact of 2009 cuts and the ramifications for 2010.



BY MICHAEL ZAWACKI

For Roy MacDonald, nothing was spared. MacDonald, the superintendent at Hobe Sound Golf Club in Hobe Sound, Fla., was forced to cut \$70,000 from last year's maintenance budget and he is looking at another \$20,000 slice heading into 2010. Survival during these tough economic times means taking a hard look at each line item on his \$900,000 maintenance budget.

"Chemicals, fertilizers and salaries – those are your big number budget items, so I looked there first," MacDonald

says. "Then I took a real close look at our actual expenses to see what I could carve out. Everything got whacked."

MacDonald's experience is not unique among U.S. golf course superintendents. Over the last year practically no one was left unphased by the economy. In fact, 63 percent of superintendents say their maintenance budgets were cut in 2009, according to Golf Course Industry research. In many cases, this forced superintendents to re-evaluate their maintenance priorities and become more familiar with

the mantra of "doing more with less."

And like MacDonald, superintendents took their red pens to their big budget items. Nearly 85 percent cut their labor force and three quarters reduced their fertilizer expenditures in 2009. These larger budget expenditures were followed by cuts in golf course accessories (69 percent) and mowers (64 percent). Insecticides were the least-slashed budget item, with only a quarter of superintendents reducing their spending from that product category.

However, for most super-

intendents these budget cuts came as no real surprise. More than half (55 percent) said 2009's cuts were about what they anticipated, according to Golf Course Industry research. A fortunate third (32 percent) of superintendents indicated the year was actually better than they had anticipated.

Many superintendents cite an unexpected increase in rounds played at their course. For the most part, this was a result of favorable, mild weather conditions that allowed them to save on fertilizer, chemical applications and irrigation costs.

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Atlanta Athletic Club - Duluth, GA
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-Site of 2011 PGA Championship

The Golf Club at Ballantyne - Charlotte, NC
-No-Till conversion from Bentgrass to CHAMPION

Bay Hill Golf Club - Orlando, FL
-Replaced Tifeagle ultradwarf with EMERALD
-Site of Arnold Palmer Invitational

Beechwood Country Club - Ahoskie, NC
-No-Till conversion from Bentgrass to CHAMPION

Bermuda Run CC - Bermuda Run, NC
-No-Till conversion from Bentgrass to CHAMPION

Big Oaks Golf Club - Saltillo, MS
-No-Till conversion from Bentgrass to CHAMPION

Bloomingdale Golfers Club - Valrico, FL
-No-Till conversion from Tifdwarf to CHAMPION

Blue Heron Golf Club - Sandy Springs, GA
-No-Till conversion from Bentgrass to CHAMPION

Brookstone Golf & CC - Acworth, GA
-No-Till conversion from Bentgrass to CHAMPION

Calusa Lakes Golf Club - Nokomis, FL
-No-Till conversion from Tifdwarf to CHAMPION

Covington Country Club - Covington, TN
-Greens sodded with EMERALD

Eagle Watch Golf Course - Woodstock, GA
-No-Till conversion from Bentgrass to CHAMPION

Falcon's Lair Golf Course - Walhalla, SC
-Greens renovation, planted CHAMPION

Hawk's Point Golf Club - Vidalia, GA
-Complete renovation, planted CHAMPION

Hole In The Wall Golf Club - Naples, FL
-Complete course renovation, greens replanted
with CHAMPION (previously planted 1998)

Holly Ridge Golf Links - Archdale, NC
-No-Till conversion from Bentgrass to CHAMPION

Hyland Hills Golf Club - Southern Pines, NC
-No-Till conversion from Bentgrass to CHAMPION

Jacksonville Beach GC - Jacksonville Beach, FL
-Greens renovation using EMERALD

Kiva Dunes Golf Club - Gulf Shores, AL
-No-Till conversion from Tifdwarf to CHAMPION

La Cita Golf & Country Club - Titusville, FL
-No-Till conversion from Tifdwarf to CHAMPION

Mirimichi Lakes Golf Course - Millington, TN
-Complete course renovation, greens replanted
with CHAMPION (previously planted 1999)

Montgomery Bell State Park GC - Burns, TN
-No-Till conversion from Bentgrass to CHAMPION

North Hills Country Club - Sherwood, AR
-No-Till conversion from Bentgrass to CHAMPION

Ocala Golf Club - Ocala, FL
-Greens renovation using EMERALD

Old Waverly Golf Club - West Point, MS
-No-Till conversion from Bentgrass to CHAMPION

Orangeburg Country Club - Orangeburg, SC
-Complete course renovation, greens replanted
with CHAMPION (previously planted 1997)

Pecan Grove Plantation - Richmond, TX
-Greens renovation using EMERALD

Pelican's Nest - Bonita Springs, FL
-Gator Course greens renovation, greens replanted
with CHAMPION (previously planted 2001)

PGA National - Palm Beach Gardens, FL
-Squire Course greens renovation using EMERALD

Pine Forest Country Club - Houston, TX
-Greens renovation using EMERALD

Pleasant Valley Country Club - Little Rock, AR
-No-Till conversion from Bentgrass to CHAMPION

Rebsamen Park Golf Course - Little Rock, AR
-No-Till conversion from Bentgrass to CHAMPION

Sandridge Golf Club - Vero Beach, FL
-No-Till conversion from Tifdwarf to CHAMPION

Sea Trail - Byrd Course - Sunset Beach, NC
-No-Till conversion from Bentgrass to CHAMPION

Seminole Golf Club - Juno Beach, FL
-No-Till conversion from Tifeagle to CHAMPION

Sequoyah State Park Golf Course - Hulbert, OK
-No-Till conversion from Bentgrass to CHAMPION

Shreveport Country Club - Shreveport, LA
-No-Till conversion from Bentgrass to CHAMPION

Spring Hill College Golf Course - Mobile, AL
-No-Till conversion from Tifdwarf to CHAMPION

St. Petersburg Country Club - St. Petersburg, FL
-No-Till conversion from Tifdwarf to CHAMPION

Stillwater Golf Course - Arrington, TN
-New Construction, CHAMPION greens

The Claw at USF - Tampa, FL
-Greens renovation using CHAMPION

The Tennessean Golf Club - Springville, TN
-No-Till conversion from Bentgrass to CHAMPION

TPC Prestancia - Club Course - Sarasota, FL
-No-Till conversion from Tifdwarf to CHAMPION

TPC San Antonio - Oaks - San Antonio, TX
-New Construction, CHAMPION greens
-Site of SBC Championship, Valero Texas Open in 2010

TPC San Antonio - Canyons - San Antonio, TX
-New Construction, CHAMPION greens

TPC Tampa Bay - Lutz, FL
-Greens renovation using CHAMPION
-Site of Outback Steakhouse Pro-Am

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Together they greatly reduced budget stress and kept course conditions at levels consistent with member expectations.

Superintendent John Westermeyer is part of the lucky minority who avoided budget cuts. The ownership at the private Twin Lakes Golf Club in Carmel, Ind., has always emphasized operational efficiency. And as a result, Westermeyer runs a lean maintenance operation.

"Because we're a private club the ownership realizes that we can't let course conditions slip and expect to survive in this market," he says. "I've always tried to do the best I can with what I have, but at the same time, the club's ownership realizes that we need resources to operate at a certain level."

For many the failing economy

and its inevitable impact on the industry provided enough advanced warning that they were able to prepare accordingly. Some cut spending early in the season to better position themselves for additional late-season cuts that may or may not have transpired at their courses.

For example, superintendent Ben Babbage spent the last two years increasing efficiencies at Storm King Golf Club in Cornwall, N.Y. For his preventive measures, he circumvented cuts this year and eliminated an additional \$50,000 from his maintenance budget while his peers struggled

to make ends meet.

"I saw this coming and I knew we were eventually going to need to come back," he says. "So now we're in a much easier financial position than other courses in our market."

And as a result, Babbage won't hesitate to ask his green committee to sign off on a few essential, big-ticket equipment purchases heading into 2010. "Now I've got a better leg to stand on (for these purchases) because I was able to make the cuts and save the course money," he says.

Many superintendents acted creatively with their budget cuts to eliminate costs but maintain playability. While 68 percent of superintendents said 2009 budget cuts affected their ability to adequately maintain course conditions, 47 percent said only they noticed the changes, and 21 percent said players and members had noticed some changes due to reduced spending.

LOOKING AHEAD

The maintenance budgets enjoyed three to five years ago won't be back anytime soon, superintendents say.

While half expect to operate at the same level in 2010, 37 percent of golf course superintendents anticipate their budgets will be cut again, according to Golf Course Industry data. As a result, 64 percent expect to make labor cuts next year, as well as to cut spending on golf course accessories (77 percent), mowers (72 percent) and fertilizer (71 percent).

But re-evaluating budget expenses is not necessarily a bad thing, says Thomas Lipscomb, the superintendent at River Bend Golf and Country Club in Great Falls, Va.

"Scaling back isn't always the worst thing in the world because it can be a real eye opener," he says. "I think this experience is sharpening superintendents' skills because it's forcing us to be more conscious of labor issues, to consider IPM (integrated pest management) practices and to communicate better and more often with our boards and committees to explain what these cuts will entail and how this will impact the greens and playing conditions."


While some cuts are good, MacDonald argues that some choices are a major gamble, and being on the losing end could be costly. And he's not alone. Fourteen percent of superintendents expect budget cuts could begin having repercussions at their courses beginning in 2010.

"It's like Russian Roulette," MacDonald says. "Let's say you cut your chemical (pesticide) spending to save some money over two years. Down the road this could have a mushrooming effect because now you can't afford to control all of the weeds and grubs that have invaded your course. So that money you initially tried to save will now come back and cost you much more just to fix these problems."


The prognosis for the industry, though, is not all doom and gloom. Many golf course superintendents believe the industry will recover, albeit at a much slower rate than the rest of the economy. And while it's not immune to the ripple effect of the national recession, the golf industry is resilient and will persevere, superintendents say.

"Golf courses can and will survive this recession," Babbage says. "For superintendents it's going to come down to what the members want in their course. That's what we need to figure out going forward, how much will that cost – whether it's in money or more time and effort on our part – to make them happy." GCI


For more facts and figures on superintendents' views on their 2009 and 2010 budgets, as well as additional coverage on this topic, check out the December online extras at golfcourseindustry.com.



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STARTING FROM SCRATCH



**A look at golf course management through
ZERO-BASED BUDGETING.**

BY MICHAEL D. VOGT, CGCS, CGIA

The need to control golf course maintenance expenses in this economy is becoming more important than ever. Building a budget component-by-component, dollar-by-dollar is the goal. The best way to study costs is to develop the zero-based budget, and thereby justify each cost center. This approach is far better than the traditional approach of doing inflation-adjusted budgets with percentage increases year after year. The result is a justifiable course budget based on real costs for the actual year.

The first step for addressing the golf course budget is a written standard for quality goals and the establishment of golf course maintenance standards. These standards should be concise at describing the "hows," "whys" and "whos," so that the zero-based budget can be built.

Standards are written guidelines for golf course maintenance minimums and goals. The golf course superintendent should carefully draft these standards with major input from the green/grounds committee.

THE ZERO-BASED BUDGET

Starting with all line items being zero, the budget exercise begins. Labor, based on predicted activities, should constitute the beginning of the process. The standards and cycle times should yield an hourly total for routine maintenance. Labor dollar amounts should be relatively simple to assign to job tasks. For instance, mowing greens would not require a high wage earner to accomplish, while applying fertilizers and chemicals to green surfaces should require a more experienced, higher-wage earner.

The wild card in any golf maintenance labor budget is weather and its related impact on dollars needed to provide standards that are acceptable to membership. During the

golf season, weather and its impact on golf course maintenance should be monitored to keep labor expenditures to a minimum. The superintendent must communicate with regular frequency to the predetermined authority on additions/deletions to the allotted funds in each budget category. Hot, humid weather can increase fungicide application rates and frequencies, or drought can increase power and water use. The superintendent with training must make decisions on course requirements; he also must be a good communicator when it comes to justifying budget variances.

When building a golf maintenance budget from zero the superintendent must take into account the individual line item areas such as fertilizers and chemicals. These commodities are needed to safeguard turf from disease, insect damage, weeds and to control growth and enhance playability. They usually amount to between 8 and 15 percent of a total budget.

Price increases have steadily made an impact on the cost to deliver fine turf. An application program with specific dates, rates and cost per square foot easily can be forecasted with the use of spreadsheet programs. Basically, programs to spray herbicides, fungicides, fertilizers and other chemicals can be forecasted. Pricing these products is generally performed through competitive bidding.

Equipment maintenance and repair also are large additional expenditures included in the golf maintenance budget (usually 3 to 7 percent). An examination of repair records should take place to arrive at anticipated repair costs or whether equipment replacement is necessary.

Building-up each line item based on experience and quality goals is necessary for establishing a zero-based budget. This way, each cost item is understood and justified.

ADVANTAGES OF ZERO-BASED BUDGETING:

1. Provides efficient allocation of course maintenance resources based on needs and standards.
2. Challenges superintendent to find cost-effective ways to improve standards and operations.
3. Eliminates inflated budgets.
4. Increases maintenance staff motivation

by thorough involvement in goals and in monitoring actual time expenditures, thus providing greater initiative and responsibility for all personnel involved.

5. Improves communications and coordination with management, committees and the board.
6. Identifies and introduces new ways to do things.

HISTORICAL INCREMENTAL BUDGETING

Incremental course budgeting uses a budget or actual expenditures from the previous annual period. Incremental amounts are added to the old budget to arrive at the new maintenance budget.

This approach is not recommended, as it fails to take into account changing economic or operational circumstances. Moreover, it encourages "spending up to the present budget" to ensure reasonable allocations are available for the next budgetary period. It leads to a "spend it or lose it" mentality.

ZERO-BASED VS. INCREMENTAL BUDGETING

Across the country, many superintendents have had or will have their budgets frozen or reduced due to the economy. Many clubs also compare course operations, size and budgets with other nearby clubs.

Important issues for any club are golfers and their expectations for fine course maintenance. To satisfy those expectations, maintenance costs sometimes can get out of control. Is it time to scale back on items such as bunker maintenance (a variable expense), as it fast becomes equal to greens maintenance costs? Is out-of-play area maintenance critical to the overall golf experience? Is a vast array of annual flowers superior to perennial plantings? The key is to document and communicate quality expectations with the need to achieve a healthy financial situation during these difficult economic times. Everything done on the course costs money, and thus, priorities need to be set.

There are few reliable methods for comparing maintenance budgets from course to course. The variables associated with comparing different course operations are:

- Managed sizes of turf on greens, tees and fairways;
- Geographic location of the course;
- The number of sand bunkers and bunker design;
- Number of annual rounds of golf played;
- Water and soil quality; and
- The quality standards (goals) set for course conditioning.

Some comparisons that may be useful in certain circumstances are:

- Total maintenance cost per acre;
- Total maintenance costs per hole;
- Labor hours per week;
- Labor hours per golf hole; and



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- Maintenance dollars per golf round.

In 2007 the Metropolitan Golf Association Foundation studied the maintenance expenses of more than 66 private clubs in the New York/New Jersey area. Of the clubs surveyed in three distinct regions, an 11 percent differential was observed in average maintenance budgets during the previous year. In Rubin Brown's 2007 Country Club Stats report of major clubs in St. Louis, the variation in golf course maintenance costs was more than 12 percent throughout the year of the study.

As we've continued to follow golf course maintenance expenses, the trend in maintenance costs has generally increased well in excess of the increases in the Consumer Price Index.

There could be further pressures on course maintenance expenses due to volatility in oil prices. The up and down fluctuation in oil prices will not only affect what is normally only a 3 to 5 percent inflationary impact in the typical budget, but it can also vary the cost of most fertilizers and chemicals that are derived from petrochemicals and the associated delivery costs.

CONTROLLING COSTS

Over the years, a superintendent's need for increasing budgets was necessary to keep pace with the members' ever increasing demands for a better and better golf course. How does this affect budgeting?

Consider equipment purchases, like a walking greens mower. A 22-inch mower in 1988 was \$2,500. Today it costs more than \$6,500. The inflation rate within the last 20 years was 82.44 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and this would put today's inflation-adjusted cost for that greens mower at only \$4,561. Yet today's mower at \$6,500 has inflated in cost by an additional 32.5 percent. Keep in mind, today's mower will not produce a significant decrease in mowing height or an increase in quality of cut.

CONCLUSION

The actual assembly of course maintenance costs can be improved with savings being generated simply by building up a zero-based annual budget. Every cost is justified, and this assures for better management of labor, equipment and material purchases.

If clubs do not take the initiative to require the zero-based budget, they'll be forced to make unrealistic, across the

board budget cuts in sharply declining economies. The zero-based budget makes sense for any economy, but even more so today when cost controls and budget cuts are the order-of-the-day. Isn't it time your club begins to protect its most important asset with a justifiable budgeting process? **GCI**

Michael D. Vogt, CGCS, CGIA, is a golf course maintenance and irrigation system specialist with the McMahon Group, a private club consulting group. He developed his zero-based budgeting techniques based on his 26 years as golf course superintendent and as general manager.

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GROUND ZERO

A zero-based approach keeps Estero Country Club's maintenance budget "lean and mean." BY MARISA PALMIERI



Estero Country Club in Fort Myers, Fla., is one facility that's benefitted from zero-based budgeting – especially in the wake of the economic recession and downturn in the private club market.

That facility, which is managed by general manager John Schoellner, who's both a certified club manager, certified club executive and a certified golf course superintendent, has expanded the program from the maintenance department to just about everywhere else in the facility.

"It's pretty simple," says Schoellner, describing the process, which entails creating an annual budget that's essentially a business plan of what normal conditions would be for every department. For example, in the maintenance department, the superintendent accounts for every single man, what he makes, how many hours a week he works and the cost for his benefits for every month of the year. After that, he plans for the fertilizer use for each part of the golf course and then for every product, line by line, all the way through the budget. Every item is backed up by a quote from a vendor, and includes a narrative description for how it's going to be used. The result is a 12-page book that justifies every dollar in the budget.

"When the people on the board and finance committee review it, they can sit down and know that these numbers aren't just pulled out of the air," Schoellner says. "That was the thought pattern when I got here. They were basically adding 5 percent onto last year's budget. Even for labor. That meant there were people who had been here for awhile getting paid too much, which meant new people weren't getting paid enough."

MEETING RESISTANCE

When Schoellner arrived at Estero a little more than two years ago, the maintenance

budget had already been approved, but he had superintendent Bruce Bach go back through and create a zero-based budget by justifying everything without looking at the numbers from the previous year. The result was nearly 10 percent saved and the reduction of two full-time and one part-time laborer based on a series of studies to determine how much time and labor every task on the golf course took.

Bach was surprised at first, Schoellner says. He had never heard of doing the budget that way and there was some resistance. "It was work," he says, explaining that Bach wasn't previously what he'd call "a numbers guy," despite his technical expertise. "So he's learning country club bookkeeping and the more he understands it, the more he accepts it. He's gotten better each year. He's really confident in his budget this year."

While the superintendent may have resisted change, it was likely easier to swallow coming from a former superintendent.

"I learned from Joe Duich at Penn State how to grow grass and watch the dollar," says Schoellner, who received his two-year turf management degree in 1969. "One thing I've done through my whole career is keep a copy of every bill that's come in and keep spreadsheets, going back to the old green ledgers and up to Excel."

Not surprisingly, there were rumblings of resistance from other superintendents who heard about what Estero was doing, Schoellner says.

"They didn't like it," he says. "They liked having the fat that they could move around. When you're lean and mean, you have to justify everything you're doing. For example, we use purchase orders for everything over \$500. If the PO isn't in the budget, there needs to be a detailed explanation for what and why the expense is."

TIME FOR CUTS

It's tough to pad the budget with a zero-based format, which critics say makes unexpected circumstances or emergencies tough to bear.

But Schoellner says the club can't budget for hurricanes or disasters.

"We budget for normal and we have a 3 percent number that's not budgeted to be used clubwide if we need it." For example, the contingency fund recently paid for an \$11,000 pump station repair.

Another thing that's not necessarily predictable is market downturns, like the one that took place this year. "We were asked to cut back about \$200,000 in expenses," Schoellner says, adding that the maintenance department came up with half of those cuts.

"It's all because they can go back, look at their budget and see where they can cut back and what the results will be," he says, noting that the superintendent cut back on fertilizer use in the roughs, stretched several chemical applications and eliminated overtime.

The zero-based budgeting also improves board relations. Having a budget where every item is justifiable helps build credibility with the board and is a tool for selling programs.

"If your board can see that you know what you're talking about and it's documented in black and white, there's not too many things they can say no to," he says.

If zero-based budgeting is so great, then why doesn't everyone do it?

"Some are afraid of it," Schoellner says. "Everybody has to work together. I see more and more people doing it once they realize the benefits. It's great because everybody knows what's happening, and we're not lazy. It's easy for people to get complacent, but things have changed, and they're never going back to where they were." GCI

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PINPOINTING DEFICIENCIES

Irrigation audits reveal superintendents may need to change nozzles, adjust throw and hand-water to improve uniformity. BY JOHN WALSH

Only about 8 percent of 18-hole golf facilities nationally had their irrigation systems audited by a certified irrigation auditor from 2001-2005.

Uniformity.

That's the key to effective and efficient irrigation. It's what all superintendents strive to improve, yet they don't always have the time to make that improvement.

An irrigation audit, or catch-can testing, is a common method of measuring distribution uniformity. Some superintendents perform audits on their own; some hire consultants, although consultants usually perform a larger evaluation, focusing more on an irrigation system's hydraulics and controls.

Only about 8 percent of 18-hole golf facilities nationally had their irrigation systems audited by a certified irrigation auditor from 2001-2005, the most recent years for which there's data, according to the GCSAA and Environmental Institute for Golf's "Water Use and Conservation Practices on U.S. Golf Courses" report.

Andy Slack, president of West Coast-based Spot Water Management, says some superintendents know irrigation, some think they know irrigation and some don't know irrigation at all.

"Many don't have the time or the expertise to spend analyzing their irrigation system, so they would rather hire an expert," Slack says. "The guys who are insecure try to do everything in house. Those who are more secure in their jobs want an objective opinion to confirm what they think."

If a superintendent wants to conduct audits frequently, it doesn't make sense to hire Slack. However, an evaluation is different.

"With an evaluation, I look at parts of the irrigation system, such as the hydraulics and the control system," he says. "Superintendents don't always have adequate knowledge of those areas."

"I've learned doing a catch-can test isn't worth the time or effort," he adds. "If you know irrigation, you should be able to look at the turf and estimate the distribution uniformity within 5 percent. Catch-can tests, which aren't very valuable, look at the driest 25 percent. I'd put money toward hydraulics and the control system instead."

Jason Green, superintendent at San Jose (Calif.) Country Club, hired Slack to do an audit and evaluation of the club's irrigation

system. Previously, he hadn't done any audits in house.

"We needed an audit to set a benchmark for future benchmarks and an overall check of the system," he says, adding that uniformity was good at 81 percent but Slack's evaluation exposed some pressure issues.

Brian Vinchesi, president of East Coast-

based Irrigation Consulting and past president of the Irrigation Association, conducts many audits (putting cups out and testing sprinklers) and evaluations (checking the entire irrigation system). Many times, Vinchesi is called to verify, via a report, what a superintendent is telling a club's board: It needs significant repairs to the irrigation system or



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it needs a new one.

Facilities perform audits for different reasons, such as to document a problem, justify a new system or help with scheduling. The benefit of an audit is it provides actual data, not theoreticals. An audit provides the exact precipitation rate and targets distribution uniformity.

An audit performed on all 18 holes is rare because it's time consuming, expensive and unnecessary, Vinchesi says.

"Once you've done it, the results won't change a lot," Vinchesi says. "However, if you're watering all your greens with the same equipment, water still is put down differently. If you do an audit yourself, do part of the golf course, such as the greens."

Many superintendents see the process done by a consultant and then start doing it on their own, Vinchesi says.

A distribution uniformity of 70 percent and higher is a standard goal. Michael Dukes, associate professor and irrigation specialist at the University of Florida, says superintendents want to be in the 70- to -80-percent range. Above 85 percent is exceptional, he says.

AUDITING BY THE NUMBERS

Percent of golf facilities that have conducted an irrigation system audit

By facility type

Public	6%
Private	11%

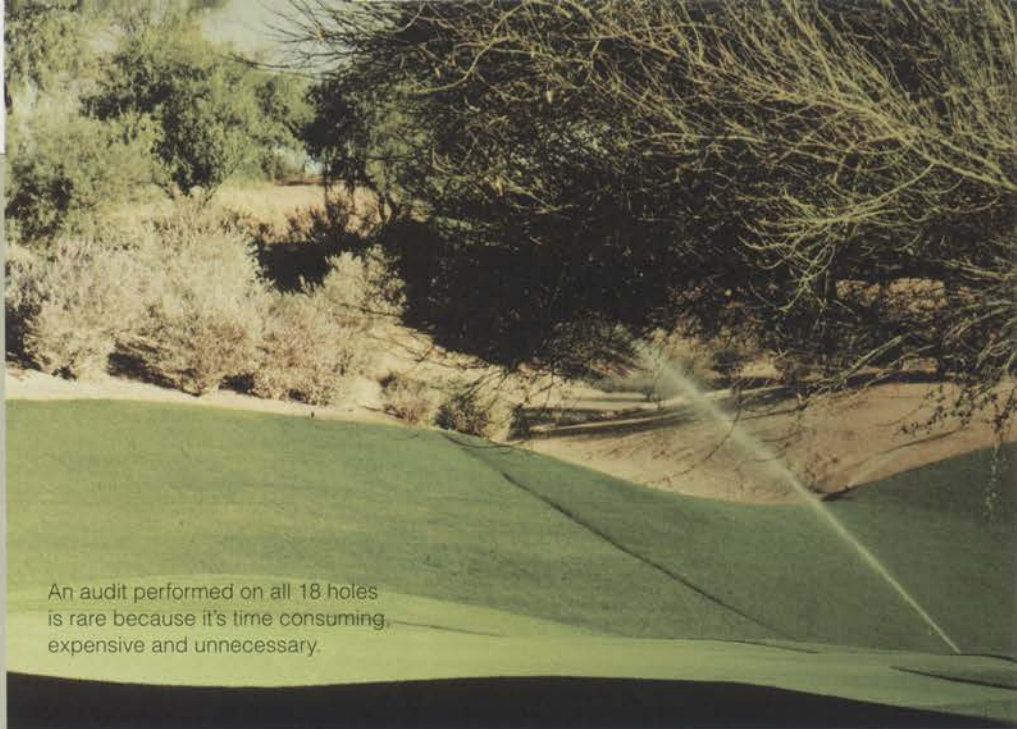
By maintenance budget

<\$500,000	5%
\$500,000-\$999,999	8%
\$1 million+	16%

By agronomic region

Southwest	15%
Southeast	11%
Northeast	7%
Pacific	7%
Transition	7%
North Central	5%
Upper West/Mountain	5%

Source: The GCSAA and Environmental Institute for Golf's "Water Use and Conservation Practices on U.S. Golf Courses" report



An audit performed on all 18 holes is rare because it's time consuming, expensive and unnecessary.

For a consultant to audit just greens costs just less than \$10,000 and takes about three days, Vinchesi says. To do the whole course, which is rare and Vinchesi has never done, costs about \$25,000.

Vinchesi recommends superintendents focus on the trouble spots. The most common problem he sees on golf courses is that sprinklers aren't level or are too low.

"Everyone worries about spacing," he says. "If slope is a problem, it's an install issue. If they're too low, it's a maintenance issue. Some superintendents are good about keeping sprinklers at grade; others aren't."

Vinchesi helped the Governor's Club in Durham, N.C., improve its irrigation efficiency 13 percent by auditing all its greens. The club ended up replacing sprinkler heads to achieve that efficiency.

NO MATTER THE AGE

Even though Gozzer Ranch, a private, 18-hole club in Cor d' Alene, Idaho, opened in 2007, superintendent Jim McPhilomy, who worked with consultant Erik Christiansen to design the irrigation system, looks at the young system closely all the time. In fact, he has three crew members who spend all their time on the irrigation system.

McPhilomy and his staff focus on the microclimates throughout the course. Some areas are surrounded by pine trees; others are wide open.

"It's harder to determine all the microclimates during construction," he says.

Gozzer Ranch was sand capped – 9 inches in most places, 12 inches in others – and the areas that have 12 inches of sand dry out faster. So McPhilomy adjusts run times or changes nozzles to improve uniformity and

avoid creating wet spots.

McPhilomy has deep roots in irrigation. His father, who had a keen interest in irrigation, was a golf course superintendent for 25 years. After that, he became an irrigation consultant in the early 1980s. McPhilomy worked with his father performing catch-can tests at a time before the newer control systems came to market.

"It was a great learning experience for me," he says.

Even though Gozzer is a new golf course, there's still a need for McPhilomy to do catch-can testing.

"We're using catch cans to see where we should change nozzles or increase or decrease the distance of throw," he says, adding that the sprinklers are spaced 65 feet apart.

When performing a catch-can test, McPhilomy recommends using a minimum of 20 cans and as many as 35 for a 2,000-square-foot area.

"Most guys are aware of the need to improve irrigation uniformity," he says. "We all talk about it. But it's hard to find time to do. I want to do it based on my experience with my dad. It's good education to check the theories we learned about in school."

The main reason McPhilomy performs audits is uniformity.

"Everything we do is based on irrigation uniformity," he says. "It affects fertilization, compaction, disease pressure, surface wear, etc. The more uniform and the fewer wet and dry areas we have, the better."

With a new course and irrigation system, superintendents have a somewhat false sense of reliability.

"When a system is installed, there's a sense of, 'Hey, we paid X amount of money

to have this system designed and installed, so it should work right," McPhilomy says. "But that's not always the case."

The intentions are always right, but what if the architect moves a bunker after the irrigation system has been installed? That, in turn, affects uniformity because the sprinklers need to be moved. The superintendent needs to fix problems areas around bunkers or large greens. Steep slopes factor in, too.

"There are some things that aren't thought of during the design phase," he says. "That's when the superintendent comes in to manage those areas."

HAND-WATERING

Even with the help of an audit and moisture meter, sometimes hand-watering is inevitable, says Larry Stowell of San Diego-based PACE Turf. A moisture meter and a virtual irrigation audit help diagnose irrigation distribution problems, but unfortunately, they don't correct the problem.

"Only hand-watering will overcome the deficits of circular head-to-head design limitations," he says.

A soil-moisture meter and virtual irrigation map help superintendents communicate some of the problems they encounter trying to maintain uniform and dry turfgrass conditions.

"Without periodic rainfall to even out the soil-moisture profile, it's impossible to deliver the ultimate in dry, fast turf conditions without supplemental hand-watering," Stowell says.

For Green, hand-watering the 100-year-old push up greens at San Jose is a must because of the high clay content in the soil.

LEARNING MORE

If superintendents want to learn more about audits, they can attend seminars put on by the Irrigation Association or GCSAA.

"Many times it's difficult to get enough superintendents to

attend the irrigation audit seminar at local meetings, but it's a hit at the Golf Industry Show," Vinchesi says.

"I like superintendents to do it on their own because they learn a lot more," he adds. "It's just time consuming. It's more visual than reviewing numbers. There's really no drawback for superintendents to do an audit on their own. Credibility can be an issue with boards because they seem to want to pay someone to do it."

Green's assistant has been trained as an irrigation auditor, so Green will rely on him to audit the irrigation system regularly and hire Stack every other year for evaluations.

Despite all the irrigation system improvements during the past 25 years, irrigation still comes down to uniformity.

"We're still at a disadvantage because of physics," McPhilomy says. "I'd like to see a sprinkler head that puts down water more uniformly, but I don't have the answer." GCI

John Walsh is a freelance writer based in Bay Village, Ohio.

For information on the Irrigation Association's recommendations for irrigation audits, visit the July Online Extras section at golfcourseindustry.com.



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As many superintendents can attest to, deer can wreak havoc on a golf course and must be controlled with a chemical deterrent, such as Liquid Fence.



PEST PREVENTION

The pansies superintendent Mike Bankert has growing on the three public golf courses he oversees are not only a treat to the eyes but also to the palates of the local deer population, and he has experimented with numerous control products to curb their snacking.

Recently, Bankert has had success using Liquid Fence at the Myrtle Beach National Golf Course in Myrtle Beach, S.C. Without use of a wildlife control product the annuals would have to be replanted, a time consuming and expensive process for three 18-hole golf courses.

Bankert estimates the cost of maintaining the course's annuals, sans wildlife repellents, is between \$250,000 and \$300,000. Given that his total annual maintenance budget for the three courses is about \$2 million, a wildlife control product like Liquid Fence helps Bankert stay well within his budget range. "Liquid Fence generally costs us about \$400 to \$500 (annually)," he says.

At this price point, Bankert is able to better focus his time on spending his budget on other priorities, such as maintenance workers.

Out of the roughly 40 maintenance employees he has working at Myrtle Beach National Golf Course, only one is responsible for applying the wildlife control product. The product is applied every three to four weeks according to its directions. Ultimately, the amount of rainfall the course receives determines the fre-

quency in which it must be sprayed to remain potent and repelling the deer.

Comparing Liquid Fence to other remedies he has used in the past – such as blood meal and coyote urine – Bankert says there is a noticeable difference. For example, many wildlife deterrent products available to superintendents simply taste bad to the deer. Bankert has noticed that an awful taste does not seem to be enough of a long-term deterrent to drive them away for good. "They kind of just get used to the hot (spicy) flavor and they eat it anyway," Bankert says.

The distinction with Liquid Fence is the product smells bad, eliminating the need for deer to make contact with the plant. A short-term drawback, though, is the deer are not the only ones susceptible to Liquid Fence's scent, Bankert says. "It's very obvious when we spray," he says. However, Bankert has not received any complaints from players and the odor lifts after a day. Bankert will take the short-term smell over costly plant loss.

In addition, Liquid Fence is an all-natural product. And since Myrtle Beach National Golf Course is one step from receiving its Audubon certification, the course is eager to use an environmentally friendly deterrent.

"I would say we probably wouldn't be able to plant certain beds out here if I didn't use Liquid Fence," Bankert says. **GCI**

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SUMMARY:

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Terry Buchen, CGCS, MG, is president of Golf Agronomy International. He's a 41-year, life member of the GCSAA. He can be reached at 757-561-7777 or terrybuchen@earthlink.net.

Travels With Terry

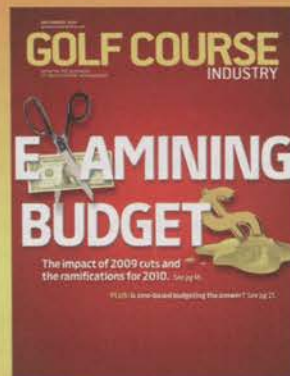
Globetrotting consulting agronomist Terry Buchen visits many golf courses annually with his digital camera in hand. He shares helpful ideas relating to maintenance equipment from the golf course superintendents he visits – as well as a few ideas of his own – with timely photos and captions that explore the changing world of golf course management.

TRAILING ALONG

Rich Bassett, equipment mechanic, and Randall Pinckney, golf course manager, at the Manor Country Club in Rockville, Md., built a generator/portable pump trailer using scrap metal and materials they had in inventory. The Honda EB 5000X generator measures approximately 23 inches by 35 inches and is bolted to the main frame. The FLYGT Ready 4 Pump is used for pumping out standing water in bunkers and puddles. It's stored, along with the 2-inch-by-50-inch discharge hose, in a 15.5-inch-by-23-inch storage area that has a 1-inch wire mesh screen floor. The main frame is made out of 2-inch square hollow tubing and the tongue uses 1.75-inch square hollow tubing. The 16.5-inch wheels and tires are from an EZ-GO golf cart. The labor to build the trailer was approximately five hours.



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Pat Jones is president of Flagstick LLC, a consulting firm that provides sales and marketing intelligence to green industry businesses. He can be reached at psjhawk@cox.net or 440-478-4763.

2010: A GOLF ODYSSEY

I would like to go on the record and report that I'm deeply disappointed with the state of things as we reach the 10th year of the new millennium.

Is it the economy that's troubling me? No. Is it our social ills? No. Is it the lack of civility in American life? No.

Here's the problem: I want my damn flying jet pack! It's almost 2010, for gosh sakes. Where's my robot butler? Where's the "food transmogrifier" that instantly supplies all my tasty meals with one keystroke on my computer? And don't even get me started about the lack of a warp drive on my Jeep.

As my fellow 40-somethings will remember, there were *promises* made to us back when we were just wee sprouts. No wars. No hunger. Benevolent world government. Friendly alien visitors landing in big saucers and giving us cures for all known illnesses. And jet packs! Where the hell are the jet packs?

Instead, we're still sending young men and women to distant hell-holes to fight and die for religion and oil. Stupid, petty political divisions take up far more time and energy than wisdom and statesmanship. More people than ever are starving and jobless. And we're all sitting around waiting for the swine flu to rip us a new one.

What's more, the state of the art in today's technology seems to primarily consist of super-sophisticated video games and an endless array of mobile phone devices that – arrgghh! – link us to the rest of the world 24/7 whether we like it or not. Who thought this crap up?

But seriously folks...

Some things change, some stay the same. In the case of the golf business, here's a quick review of what we've been through in the years since Captain Kirk went off the air:

- We grew to become a serious business. There are 4,000 more golf

courses in the U.S. than there are McDonalds locations. (Would you like fries with that stunning statistic?) More than 40 percent of those courses have opened in the past two decades. The vast majority of those have been for-profit, daily fee facilities looking to turn a buck. In the same time period, the number of private country clubs has essentially stayed the same. If you believe the numbers from Golf 20/20, we are a \$76 billion industry. This is a big business. Period.

- Our technology has improved dramatically. Innovations in chemistry and equipment have, perhaps, overwhelmed us over the years. The old-timers will tell you life was a bit simpler in the days of mercury, cadmium and mowers without solid-state parts and onboard computers. Even the most rudimentary irrigation controllers have software that would blow away the stuff that sent Neil Armstrong to the moon. Genetic tinkering with turfgrass has become commonplace within a few short decades of the time Watson and Crick figured out the double-helix. It's a pretty good tech track record for a recreational pursuit that is basically using a crooked stick to propel a silly white ball into a small distant hole. Those ancient Scottish shepherders would be proud – or appalled.

- The culture of the profession has eroded. Okay, one downside: The tradition of slow advancement, apprenticeship, careful learning and experience that used to dominate the profession of greenkeeping has been supplanted by earning a degree from the right school, doing a few key internships and having connections to the right people in the right places. This has become a "who you know" rather than a "what you know" business. I'm not saying that's bad, I'm just saying that's the way it is.

- Some promises were kept, others weren't. We have become much more recognized as an integral part of the game of golf and salaries and status have grown as a result. On the other hand, we've disappointed a lot of bright young people who jumped into the profession with visions of big-time jobs, rapid advancement and some measure of celebrity dancing in their heads. Bottom line: There simply aren't as many jobs as there are good candidates.

- We have become – at least temporarily – victims of our own success. Golf became sexy, allegedly profitable, highly visible and trendy – at least among developers. Oops. Suddenly we find ourselves with way more tee times than players. Lesson learned, hopefully. But the reality is that supply needs to decrease faster than we can expect demand to rise. Hundreds of courses will go bye-bye before things get better.

- Yet, the glass is still more than half full. Think about entire industries that have tanked the last few decades and why they died. There are three big reasons: online competition, big box stores and being supplanted by a better customer experience. Well, golf can't be replaced by the Web. We're not at risk because of Wal-Mart or Costco. In fact, mom-and-pop operators might be in better shape than big corporate golf right now. And, even though many courses live and die by the economic status of their members, wealth comes and goes. But, if you provide the right customer experience for the right demographic in your area, the sky is the limit. Do it wrong and you're as dead as Sharper Image.

In the end, golf is eternal. I wish I could find words to tell you why... I just know that it is.

Now would someone please go get me a jet pack! **GCI**

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