

Read about a complete system overhaul at Val Halla Golf and Recreation Center in Cumberland, Maine, in the July Online Extras section at golfcourseindustry.com.

Technical difficulties

A high-tech renovation makes life at Starmount Forest Golf Club a lot easier. BY EMILY MULLINS

When Mike Brown solved an irrigation system maintenance problem from 600 miles away, he knew he'd chosen the right system.

"With three keystrokes, I fixed the problem from my hotel room while at a staff

boro's ever-changing water use mandates. Brown needed an irrigation control system that would best use the course's two holding ponds, each providing 3 million gallons of water that can stretch over three-and-a-half weeks, and prolong the need to tap into the

any computer with Internet access through John Deere's server. The program is also BlackBerry and iPhone compatible, which was another plus for Brown.

"We log in to our own secure page that stores our information," Brown says. "Any system upgrades happen from John Deere's end, so I never have to worry about having the most up-to-date version of software."

Brown's assistant took part in the purchasing process, traveling to meetings to test the systems in real-world settings. Brown also invited Deere representatives to present the system to the club's board and, in the end, Starmount chose an E Aurora John Deere control system that cost \$75,000. "I wanted the board and committee to know this was the product I recommended, but I also wanted them to know it's a new system on the market," Brown says. "I thought it was important that they take ownership of the decision."

With the new system, Brown and his crews spend maybe an hour a month on programming and setup issues, compared to about six hours they used to spend maintaining the old system. In addition to the ease of virtual maintenance, Brown also has seen vast improvements in water management and turf quality. For example, the course used 20 million fewer gallons of water from March 1 to Dec. 1, 2008, than during the same period in 2007 – and Greensboro was in a drought both years. This savings includes 10 million gallons of water the course would have had to buy from the city.

"It was great not to have to use the community's resources and it was also a huge monetary savings for the club," Brown says.

While he believes he took a leap of faith by stepping outside of his comfort zone, Brown is truly pleased with his decision.

"I consider myself a bleeding-heart liberal in a sea of conservatives," he says, laughing. "A lot of people in the industry would have stuck with a tried-and-true system and raised their eyebrows when I went with John Deere," he says. "But it's working out so well." **GCI**

Emily Mullins is a freelance writer based in Lakewood, Ohio.



Starmount Forest Golf Club in Greensboro, N.C., installed an E Aurora control system in March 2008.

conference in Myrtle Beach," says the superintendent at Starmount Forest Golf Club in Greensboro, N.C. "And all it took was an Internet connection."

However, life wasn't always so easy for Brown, who manages the 18-hole private course with an annual maintenance budget of about \$800,000. Before the club's irrigation control system renovation in March 2008, he and his crews operated a Toro LTC, a first generation DOS-based central control system installed at the course in 1994.

"When we'd call Toro for software support, they would have to put us on hold to research our problem because our system wasn't even part of their active troubleshooting manual," Brown says. "Needless to say, it didn't have the sophistication we needed."

Not only did Brown need a more technologically sophisticated system, he also needed a system that could keep up with Greens-

boro's six wet wells of city water, or "liquid gold," as Brown calls it.

The facility was at the half-life of the system's previous renovation that took place in 1999, so the pipe, heads and other components were still in working order. Brown's focus was on a control system that would stay relevant for as long as possible, ideally until the system's next scheduled overhaul in about 10 years. His top three picks were Rain Bird, Toro and John Deere.

"Originally Deere wasn't at the top of my list," Brown says. "But because of their solid reputation on the equipment end of things, I decided to check them out."

Brown was drawn to John Deere's strictly Internet-based control system. Unlike other companies' "PC anywhere" aspect, which means a system can be controlled from any computer with the appropriate software, the John Deere system can be controlled from