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TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

Have you ever heard the story about the Australian rabbits? Way back in the 1850s, an English transplant to the then-colony decided to release a dozen rabbits into the area to hunt for fun. This fine fellow, Thomas Austin, wrote at the time: “The introduction of a few rabbits could do little harm and might provide a touch of home, in addition to a spot of hunting.”

A lovely thought...except those 12 rabbits proceeded to do what rabbits do best and, within a decade, there were millions of those adorable little fur balls hopping around the territory eating everything in sight. They devastated crops and defoliated the landscape, leading to erosion, flooding and a massive change in the ecosystem.

Thus was born the “Law of Unintended Consequences.” It’s kind of like Murphy’s Law only it usually involves negative side-effects from a seemingly positive act.

In our happy little business, it helps us understand why perfectly good pesticides sometimes promote the development of impossible-to-kill resistant species. It partly explains why the huge construction boom in the ‘90s is now recognized as a crushing oversupply of courses. It is the reason that doing the right thing for the long-term enjoyment of your golfers (e.g., aeration) can cause anger or occasionally even unemployment.

So, here we are in the 21st century – 160 years after Mr. Austin’s faux pas – and we once again find ourselves up to our elbows in rabbits. Specifically, I refer to the unique problem facing local chapters right now.

A decade ago, as part of a massive overhaul of GCSAA’s governance structure, a new rule was put forth and enacted that required reciprocity for memberships. In short, if you were a member of a GCSAA-affiliated chapter, you also had to be a member of the national, and vice versa.

It was a great idea at the time. Even

curmudgeons like me supported it. It created an incentive for more superintendents to come into the “big tent” of the national. It helped chapters professionalize their operations, draft legitimate charters and benefit more from GCSAA’s programs. The “carrot” held out by the national leadership was broadly welcomed by most chapters who desperately wanted the help. Affiliation was a pain in the butt, but it was deemed as worthwhile for nearly all local associations.

At the time, a few members grumbled about the fact that instead of just paying their local dues of \$50 or \$100,

file member – a guy making \$38,000 a year at a daily-fee in Nebraska – is struggling just to get by like everyone else. Education, meetings and big conferences are a luxury when you’re wondering how to pay the mortgage.

I’ve talked to many chapter leaders over the past year about how they’re dealing with this. They’re cutting back on activities, going digital with their newsletters and doing other smart things to manage on a limited budget. But what really concerns them is the membership renewal cycle that’s going on right now. They have many folks who they’re carrying as members

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they were paying national dues of another \$300 or whatever. For supers at mom-and-pop operations where those dues often came out of the individual member’s pocket, it was a strain. But, golf was booming, jobs were plentiful and most didn’t balk. National and chapter membership grew.

Then the golf economy began to sag and facility budgets really got hit hard in late 2008 and 2009. Predictably, one of the first line items to get zeroed-out at many courses was the dues and education budget. Suddenly many superintendents – not just those at limited-budget facilities – were faced with the unhappy prospect of reaching into their own pockets for dues. And paying both local and national dues was tough.

Let’s face it: when it comes to a choice between paying your professional association dues or paying the rent, there is no choice. That’s the reality for many superintendents who aren’t making six-figure salaries at upscale clubs. The typical rank-and-

who haven’t paid dues in a while. At some point, they have to kick them out or reclassify them as “inactive.”

GCSAA has already seen a 15-percent reduction in membership over the past few years and I suspect the conclusion of this dues cycle will reduce the total a bit more. But, with all due respect to the national, chapters are the heart and soul of the profession. Local education, local agronomic knowledge and local networking are vastly important to the average superintendent... particularly when times are tough and cheap, creative ideas are the order of the day.

So, the Law of Unintended Consequences has reared its ugly head within our association structure. The dual affiliation concept that was so promising a few years back now threatens to shred the very fabric of professionalism in our business. Perhaps it’s time to reconsider – or at least temporarily suspend – that rule to make sure we don’t lose the very folks we wanted to bring into the fold. **GCI**