

# Best laid plans

Avoid the common traps and added costs superintendents and courses fall into during a renovation project.





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## BY BOB LOHMANN

So, you're planning a modest renovation project for the spring of 2013. Nothing fancy – the budget is some \$100,000 or less. You've actually been plotting a strategy for getting this done for two or three years now. After a season where revenues were actually better than anticipated (Hallelujah!), the money and backing are finally in place.

Well, I've got news for you: You're probably already behind the scheduling 8-ball.

By the same token, if you're thinking you might tackle that project not this spring, but in the fall, do yourself a favor and start your serious planning today! Now is the time to get all your i's dotted and t's crossed. The planning you do now could save you thousands a year from now.

In the last six weeks, our firm has received probably 10 different calls from superintendents and course owners wanting to get a modest renovation job done this fall, before the snow flies. These projects aren't the result of any master planning. They're more attributable to facilities scrimping and saving enough to address issues that have probably lingered/festered for several years.

They've pulled together the cash and they want to move.

And that's a good thing in the great scheme of things. Two years ago, the revenue picture didn't allow for scrimping, saving and project-undertaking. It's evidence to us here at Lohmann Golf Designs, and our sister construction division, Golf Creations, that rock-bottom is behind us and things are slowly improving.

However, money is still tight, which makes the planning process all the more critical. As much as we relish the opportunity to do jobs on the spur of the moment, everyone is better served (including your friends in accounting) by prudent planning.

For example, here in the Midwest lots of superintendents figure they can redo bunkers late in the fall, sod the surrounds and be back online for spring opening. Well, you can work with sod well into November no doubt, but that sod will need irrigation and most superintendents like to blow out their systems mid- to late-October. If you wait to shut down until later, can your system handle the freezing overnight temperatures that occur that time of year? Speaking of sod, how late will the farms be cutting? If weather slows you down, do you have a contingency plan for finishing in the spring? Will it cost you extra money? Have you planned for these items in advance?

Let me give you some examples of the traps into which we see supers and their employing course/clubs fall, and how to avoid them (and their associated costs). Because you can plan your way out of most any problem. Even when you can't, there are construction/planning strategies that can lessen the pain.

When architects hold forth on this subject, we sound like scolds and schoolmarm. But if you take anything to heart after reading this, please promise me it'll be this: Put together an asset management plan that details a prioritized wish list of projects

that need doing, along with cost projections and detailed scheduling parameters.

I'm not recommending a Master Plan. An asset management plan is not an overarching, long-term plan for a golf course property. Instead, it is segmented project by project; it presumes those upgrades/renovations/fixes will be consumated independent of each other, depending on the amount of money you have at any one moment. Because each project is considered on its own, the scheduling is also considered in a vacuum, independent of other projects.



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It's really important today that when you've budgeted \$50,000 for a project, you don't spend \$65,000.

With this sort of leg work done in advance, supers and owners can move quickly and efficiently. If, in September, they realize there is \$30,000 available, the asset management plan tells you immediately that Project A, Project D and Project E are all viable from a cost and scheduling standpoint. Or maybe there's \$50,000, making Project B and C viable, but only if they are started by a certain date (to realize the savings of using seed instead of sod) while still being able to open first thing in spring.

It's really important today that when you've budgeted 50 grand for a project, you don't spend 65 grand. With an asset management plan in place, you won't.

There was a time when saving a few grand wasn't really top of mind for superintendents planning a renovation. Ten years ago, many clubs had already invested in Master Plans that mapped out course improvements that would inevitably be funded and executed 5, 10, 15 years down the road. What's a few grand here or there, over the course of decades?

Well, times have changed. That feels like a very long time ago – like another century entirely. And something else has changed: Time schedules seem to have gotten tighter, or maybe more accurately,

owners/golfers want things done now, but they don't want you to start until later.

We ran into this situation a bit this fall at a project we're working on with Links Across America, developing a 5-hole short course. It was planned as a 3-5 week construction project and, after getting a late go-ahead to start the planning and bidding, then waiting several weeks for all our approvals, we were looking at a start date of Sept. 12. Right there, we were pushing the envelope to get seed down before mid October.

Ideally, you want to seed a fall project in our area around August, so you have a couple months of the warm days and cool nights ideal for growing. So long as soil temperatures are above 50 degrees, you're good, but as soon as those late fall temperatures drop and the soil gets cold, plant growth halts. The best you can hope for is an early blanket of snow that insulates all winter. Snow these days is so unpredictable, however, that any fall grow-in not well established by mid-October can fall victim to melts and refreezing over the winter months. You don't want to rely on young seed making it through such a winter unscathed.

So we had a classic scheduling crunch. Bids came in high because of that anticipated crunch (extra labor, overtime) and all of a sudden

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the project was over budget.

Ultimately, we advised the client to put off construction and seeding till the spring of 2013. Bids can be revisited over the winter, according to a more expansive schedule; we'll likely get a few more bidders and see if we can get better numbers. Most important, the client will ultimately have a finished product with healthy, durable turf. When the schedule is against you, why play a dangerous hand? Better to pull back, reconsider the project planning, and make the safest, most efficient use of the client's money.

Sometimes pulling back is the hardest thing to do, because these spur of the moment projects generate excitement and momentum quickly. That's why proper pre-planning is so critical; it allows the necessary time to pare down emotions and consider the most prudent options. Sometimes you improve a dangerous hand by simply taking your time.

In Appleton, Wis., we're executing a renovation at Reid Municipal GC where the plan, all along, had been to start mid-summer 2013 (working back from an August 2013 seeding deadline), finish by late fall, and reopen in the spring/summer of 2014. But the client here, the City of Appleton, was anxious about the schedule. Specifically, when you seed the fall prior, you really don't know when the course will reopen the following spring – again, you just don't know how the weather will treat you in the fall, how the new seed will come through the winter, or how quickly the spring will warm up.

So the city made a somewhat unconventional but I think ultimately sound decision. It moved the start date up to spring 2013, reasoning that it was better to close for one full season and guarantee the course would open alongside other golf options immediately in the spring of 2014. The key here, though, is that by starting the planning process really

early on, the city was able to make this major scheduling change as a matter of course, with little or no threat to the coordination or costs of the project.

In fact, we'll probably gain extra time and may save some money under this schedule, because some of the work can be done this winter. We're up there working at Reid right now – removing trees and isolating those parts of the irrigation system that will be dismantled next year. Some main irrigation lines have to be rerouted as part of the preparation as well, and that's work you want to do in winter while the irrigation system is empty of water. It will also allow us to be ready so the major work can begin in the spring, so soon as the weather allows.

This winter, the contractor will be out there at Reid digging lakes, as the weather allows. The nature of this renovation – we're vastly expanding stormwater retention and providing water quality control for a large area of the City – informed the decision to move the schedule up. Winter can be a great time to dig ponds and do tree work, as frozen ground is better for tracking across the site than soggy ground, and turf damage can be minimized. Winter is also a good time to do tree work, too, as oftentimes golfers come back in the spring and never notice they're gone.

The point is, while the grand old Master Plans of yore may be dead, or at least in serious hibernation, the primary objective of these valuable exercises should not be overlooked. Don't underestimate the incredibly useful habit of continual planning. I'm not saying this is a lost art. However, get yourself an asset management plan, because you'll find it incredibly useful. **GCI**

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