



USE YOUR HEAD

Superintendents must weigh whether to upgrade their irrigation heads or go for a total system replacement. Successfully selling either concept to your membership is another matter.

By Jason Stahl

When Steve Cook went to his membership with a proposal to upgrade Oakland Hills' irrigation system more than a decade ago, he had a specific sales plan: talk playing conditions, and nothing more.

"I think it has to revolve around that," says Cook. "I think you get lost in the weeds when you start talking about agronomics, root systems... Their eyes start to glaze over."

Cook wanted to stop the "bandage" approach of continually upgrading or fixing parts of the system. At the time, they were looking at upgrading the controllers, and he realized they were trying to put lipstick on a pig.

"I said we were better off letting [the irrigation system] fall apart and plan a full upgrade three to five years down the road," he says. "I advised that we pocket our money and put it in the bank and wait till we were ready to do the whole thing. Eventually, you have to replace your car because it won't last forever."

Cook broke it down for the members in the simplest terms so they could understand his rationale and know that it had nothing to do with making his job easier but that it was all about trying to provide better member services and being a good steward with their money.

"We told them we could decrease the water window from 12 to 8

hours, which would mean better playing conditions and better member service," says Cook. "We told them we would not be in their way as much, we wouldn't have to hand-water as much – and there were some labor savings that went along with that."

Instead of having three old 60-hp motors, he reasoned, let's install a variable frequency drive (VFD). "And if there are cost savings over 10 years, that's great," Cook told them. "But let's not get lost in how many kilowatts or money we're going to save. We're putting in a state-of-the-art VFD drive, which is the best we can do right now and I know it's going to be better than the pump station we currently have."

Cook stayed away from the environmental angle, saying while that may have been a valid selling point at a course with wetland areas, it wasn't for his course.

"All I said was that we were bound to be better stewards and not be throwing water out needlessly," he says. "One of the things I kept telling them was that, at the time, we had no choice but to overwater because our coverage and pressures were so bad. So we had a wet golf

course, and that couldn't be good for anybody."

In essence, Cook told his members that he would be putting in a new irrigation system so they wouldn't have to use it. That was the thing that really got them scratching their heads.

"With the system we had, we couldn't shut it off, because if we did, we would never catch up," he says. "The idea with the new system was to keep the course drier because then you could catch up. That was hard for [the members] to get: 'Playing conditions are going to get better because we're going to keep the course drier? How's that going to work?'"

So Cook laid down a daunting number: \$3 million, \$1.5 million per side, soup to nuts. Over the years, no matter what the project, he found it's better to hit members with an honest number right up front than something not representative of the whole cost.

"Hit them in the face with it," he says. "Because if you start



Steve Cook told Oakland Hills members a full-system upgrade would allow him to reduce hand watering, which would provide some labor savings.

telling them we can do it for \$600,000 by piecemealing it, then all of a sudden that turns into \$800,000, then at the end of the day you're at \$1.2 or \$1.3 million more. Tell them, if you don't want to spend that, then don't spend it, but that's the cost."

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—Steve Cook, Oakland Hills Country Club

Still having trouble selling that plan to your membership?

Irrigation consultant and GCI irrigation columnist Brian Vinchesi suggests another tact. Document and show your membership how much time you spend on irrigation and water management.

"Some guys told me 80 to 90 percent, which is ridiculous," Vinchesi says or projected time investment. "It should be 10 to 15 percent. Members should understand they didn't hire you to be spending that sort of time on the course's irrigation system."

Vinchesi warns superintendents against putting off an upgrade for too long. He often relays a cautionary tale about one course that had saved \$350,000 for their irrigation system, only to see the money earmarked for a clubhouse renovation when a new regime took over the golf course facility.

TRY THIS

Cook backed up his number with a survey of other clubs that underwent total irrigation system upgrades. And he told his members, "Let's get over the fact that it's expensive and that it's underground and you won't see it. It's not a flower box you can see when you drive in the front gate, but let's talk about it and take the next three years building a case for it."

Cook said it also helps to have a member on your side who believes in what you're doing and understands how it will help the course. And hiring a good irrigation consultant and putting them in front of the membership helps, too.

"It sounds so self-serving when a superintendent wants a new irrigation system or a new maintenance facility," Cook says. "The members say, 'Everything looks fine, why do we need that?' But if you have someone else carrying the torch for you, I think it helps."

So what if doing a total irrigation system upgrade is not a reality? Could replacing the heads alone result in significant financial and resource savings? Cook believes it could, using a heart transplant as an analogy.

"As long as the delivery system and the body is good, you can have a heart transplant," he says. "If you have clogged arteries, it's kind of tough."

Cook says he will have to make the case for replacing his own heads in the next three to five years, because at 10 to 11 years old right now, they aren't performing as they once did.

"They simply wear out, particularly if your water quality isn't good," he says.

But still, he goes back to favoring replacing the whole system. "The thing you have to weigh is, okay, I sell [my members] on these heads and it takes me three years to do this and then what? I might never be able to sell them again on replacing something else."

Chris Tritabaugh of Northland Country Club in Duluth, Minn., admits it's nice to dream about a total irrigation system upgrade, but often times it's not reality. Money is extremely tight at his club, so much so that not even highlighting the age of his system (35 years) is enough to convince membership to budge. That system's shortcomings took center stage last summer in the extremely hot and dry conditions.

IRRIGATION

How bad were the conditions? He normally budgets \$5,000 for water in July...and this year he spent \$17,000.

"But still I heard how the course was too dry and that I didn't put enough water down. To which I replied, no, I put down plenty of water, it was the inability of the system to put it

in the right place efficiently," says Tritabaugh. "It's a tough nut to crack with any membership. I doubt there is anyone out there who has gone through an irrigation renovation where, in the beginning, they had members walking up to them saying, 'We want to put in a new irrigation system.'"

Tritabaugh has had to make do with upgrading heads, moving on specifically to the next generation of 800 Series heads from Toro after starting with a mix of 600 and 700 Series. His current policy is that if there is an issue with a head and it requires anything more than a simple fix, it gets replaced.

"We've never gone around and said we're going to replace all the heads here or there," says Tritabaugh. "But I'm thinking of putting together a proposal to replace all the heads around the greens with 800 Series next year. If we can do it the best way we can, we might as well."

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water application on one green where three of the four heads are 800 Series was “night and day,” says Tritabaugh. But the total cost of \$150,000 to do a course wide head replacement (including labor and parts) keeps things at the hodgepodge level they are now: replace only when necessary. But Tritabaugh can see a different scenario at a different course.

“Maybe replacing heads alone is a good route to go for a course with a 15-year-old system that has 700 Series heads with good piping and infrastructure and a control system they like or can easily upgrade,” he says. “Maybe it gets them another 15 years and the cost is worth it.”

Tritabaugh agrees with Cook about pushing course conditions as the No. 1 justification for upgrading an irrigation system.

“What I hear most from everyone is, ‘We really like the way the course plays – fast and firm. We just don’t like how it gets when we don’t get enough rain in July,’” he says. “To me, that’s when alarm bells should be going off. They should realize the reason the course is like that is because of the irrigation system. Some people get it, some people don’t.” GCI

How about not replacing irrigation heads but just the nozzles? This past summer, superintendents saw the value in this after the whole country burned up and Mother Nature did little to help out. Mark Ferris, sales and marketing director at Underhill International, says his phone rang off the hook with superintendents asking, “What can we do to upgrade our heads?”

“Some superintendents have learned that their heads may not necessarily be worn out and only the nozzles need to be upgraded,” says Ferris. “Their heads still have life but the nozzles are worn out or it wasn’t designed properly from the beginning. It’s a gigantic savings.”

Questions superintendents typically have to answer before such an upgrade include:

- What is the rotation speed? It has to be two to three minutes – one minute is too fast, four minutes is too slow.
- Are you putting out the proper pressure of 70 psi?

Replacing nozzles can reduce watering time, Ferris says, and courses that are pumping it out of the ground can save “huge” dollars in electricity. The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California believes in nozzles enough that it’s offering a 100-percent rebate on the cost of new nozzles to golf courses in its district, he says.

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