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# Practical about **BEING GREEN**







## Dan Dinelli improves North Shore Country Club's environmental standing

BY PAT JONES

In the Chicago area, the name Dinelli primarily is associated with three storied generations of successful superintendents. The name makes you think of great courses, perfect greens and satisfied members at some of the best clubs in the nation.

The name doesn't necessarily make you think of peregrine falcons ... but it should.

Dan Dinelli, CGCS, is a branch of one of the profession's most remarkable family trees and a guy who sometimes wakes up thinking about peregrine falcons ... and bluebirds ... and water conservation ... and native areas.

As the next in an illustrious line of folks who've won the GCSAA's President's Award for Environmental Leadership, Dinelli is humbled by the honor but still pragmatic in his approach.

"It's a double-edged sword," he says. "It motivates and drives me, but it also creates expectations and responsibilities. It puts a bull's-eye on your back to meet those demands."

Dinelli was born into the business as the son and grandson of well-known superintendents in the Windy City. Uncles and cousins have tended the turf at area courses as well. His career path has been simple by most standards. Turf was already flowing through his veins from birth, so after earning associate's degrees in parks and ground management and horticulture from William Rainey Harper College and studying turfgrass management at Michigan State, he joined the staff at North Shore Country Club in 1978, became superintendent in 1993 and never left.

When Dinelli arrived at North Shore, the course was typical of most parkland-style facilities in the Midwest. Throughout three decades, he's slowly helped transform it into a showplace for eco-friendly golf and created a reputation as having a bright, scientific mind. Thanks to him, North Shore is nothing less than a living laboratory for techniques, products and ideas that help golf prove high-end playability and practical environmentalism can coexist.

### How did it feel to win the GCSAA's environmental award?

I was shocked. There are so many people in our industry who've done wonderful things and have been instrumental in our evolution. I'd

just never considered being one of them. There's still much more I can and want to do to further our efforts. Besides, success includes others, my family, support from North Shore membership and the dedicated staff, including my cousin Jerry Dinelli.

### What led you to this?

I've loved being on the GCSAA's Environmental Programs Committee for the past five years, but I've always been interested in ecology and wildlife. Before my two girls came along, my wife and I traveled a lot and studied environmental habitats. We spent time in the Philippines to learn about the Philippine eagle – there are only 300 in the world – and went bird watching in Costa Rica and other tropical forests. I love the diversity of our planet and the opportunity to constantly learn more about it. We've also been volunteers in the peregrine falcon release in Chicago (which reestablished the rare birds into the city).

All that background spilled over to the way we try to manage North Shore – constantly trying to improve the habitat and the facility's diversity.

### What are the three most important steps a superintendent can take to make a facility more environmentally friendly?

First, it takes planning. We couldn't have done what we've done without a long-range plan and a great support system within the club. You have to sell the need, and that stems from planning.

Second, you have to recognize it needs to be a complete approach. Improved playability, aesthetics and environment – it all needs to integrate into one package. The three things are inseparable in our business. The superintendent has to orchestrate that by formulating a plan and selling it to the membership. That's one of the reasons we do so much research here. Yes, it helps others, but it also demonstrates ideas to our membership that helps them accept what we think we need to do.

Finally, you have to be open-minded and continue to grow and learn. If you commit yourself to this path, you'll reach your goals.

You know, 170 acres of open green space in the middle of a city is a powerful thing from an environmental standpoint. There aren't many

landscapes like these in urban areas that can contribute so positively to the community. That's a big responsibility and big opportunity.

### When you visit other courses, what things make you cringe and think, "Boy, they should fix that"?

What pops into my head aren't so much the problems but the opportunities. Like many courses, we used to be mowed fenceline to fenceline. We implemented our first wildflower garden in 1981 and have been diversifying the property since. When I visit other courses, I usually notice things that are there that would be fun to enhance, such as places that could be tweaked to attract more birds and butterflies and diversity in habitat.

I'm envious of other courses sometimes because we're flat. It would be awesome to have the opportunity to play around with a property that has elevation changes and different microclimates. Often, there's so much that can be done for little money.

### Are most golf courses making the grade these days?

I want to believe we're all environmentally friendly – it's just a question of to what degree. There are always more things to do, even simple things such as adding birdhouses, which you can make yourself for practically nothing during the off-season. How can you naturalize out-of-play areas and save money at the same time?

But I talk to superintendents who still believe Audubon and environmental programs cost a lot of money.

The bottom line is that it needs to be a program you implement over time. You don't have to jump into it with both feet and go hog-wild. Take your time, plan, spread it out and budget a little bit every year. I'll argue it'll save you money in the long run.

### Tell us about CITYgreen.

We were updating our 2,000-plus tree inventory with help from Chris Bechtel from the Morton Arboretum. I asked to collect the data needed to complete the model CITYgreen, which I found while surfing the Internet researching environmental benefits from landscapes. CITYgreen





was developed by American Forests to help communities quantify the value of their tree expenses in terms of dollars and environmental benefits. It helps to justify and further develop their tree programs. Chris collected data from

our trees, and we fed it into the program. It tells you how much the trees contribute to the environment. It would be great to have an expanded model that includes turf. We already have done the research about what turf contributes to the

environment. It just needs to be written into a model like CITYgreen.

From that experience, I came up with an environmental balance sheet – an itemized list of how the golf course affects carbon dioxide and contributes positively in other ways versus the inputs we use and energy we consume. It could be a great management tool. My gut tells me we still consume too much, but at least we'd know where our strengths and weaknesses are and where we can make the greatest improvements.

**Why isn't that being done?**

It's on the GCSAA's radar and a matter of priority. I can say with certainty that we stand favorably compared to many other land-use activities and sports. Think about NASCAR, one of our nation's biggest spectator sports, for example. But, we can still do more. I'm concerned about our use of nitrogen. Nitrous oxide, a byproduct of fertilization, is hundreds of times more powerful than CO<sub>2</sub> and long-lived. It may not be as prevalent as CO<sub>2</sub>, but it will be on the government's radar soon. Our perspective about how we fertilize may be impacted.

**What else keeps you up at night?**

Water is still No. 1. The GCSAA is updating the (1988) Stuart Cohen study of water quality on Cape Cod golf courses to see what's changed. They're also creating IPM templates so all superintendents can have a plant health care plan and a tool to help us better understand how to best use inputs compatible with our site. The GCSAA is engaged in many great things to improve our industry, the environment and golf, but it still boils down to each superintendent pitching in.

**What do you tell those who don't understand golf and assume it's full of polluters?**

There are always people who act on emotions and fear. You need to welcome them, have them visit your facility and take a look. Whenever I've done that, I've yet to have someone leave with the same concerns. They begin to understand these plants need to be viable, healthy and active to offer the immense benefits they're capable of. You can't beat an on-site visit to win someone over.

**How do you sell the club on your actions?**

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## And the winners are ...

In addition to awarding Dan Dinelli the President's Award for Environmental Stewardship, the GCSAA will honor others at its Education Conference Opening Session in New Orleans Feb. 5. They include:

- Mark Esoda, CGCS, Atlanta Country Club – Col. John Morley Distinguished Service Award
- Monroe Miller, Blackhawk Country Club, Madison, Wis. – Col. John Morley Distinguished Service Award
- George Hamilton, Ph.D. (deceased), Penn State – Col. John Morley Distinguished Service Award
- Thomas Lavrenz, retired superintendent – Leo Feser Award
- Col. John Morley (deceased), GCSAA founder – Old Tom Morris Award

Winners of the Environmental Leaders in Golf Award and Excellence in Government Relations Awards have yet to be announced. To read GCI profiles on Esoda and Miller from earlier this year, visit [www.golfcourseindustry.com/09awardwinners](http://www.golfcourseindustry.com/09awardwinners).

emphasize the benefits for playability and economy as well. Use your Web site, newsletters, open houses – every resource you have. It needs to be somewhat subliminal. You can't force-feed them because they're busy, successful people who want to relax and play the game. You just put it out there and hope it takes and they find a comfort level with the idea.

### Do you preach the "brown is beautiful" message?

It irks me that people say "green is bad." I argue a healthy, active growing plant offers the most ecological benefits. Then, there's playability – sustainable golf is best on healthy turf – and that's usually green turf. Dead turf costs money to fix. We need to be responsible and green.

### Who inspires you?

Frank Rossi of Cornell's turf program can sing like a bird in front of a crowd. I called him a few years ago and asked how I could be more like him as a speaker.

Obviously, my grandfather Frank Dinelli and dad Joe Dinelli were inspirations. Some people might argue there are too many Dinellis in this business, but I love 'em all.

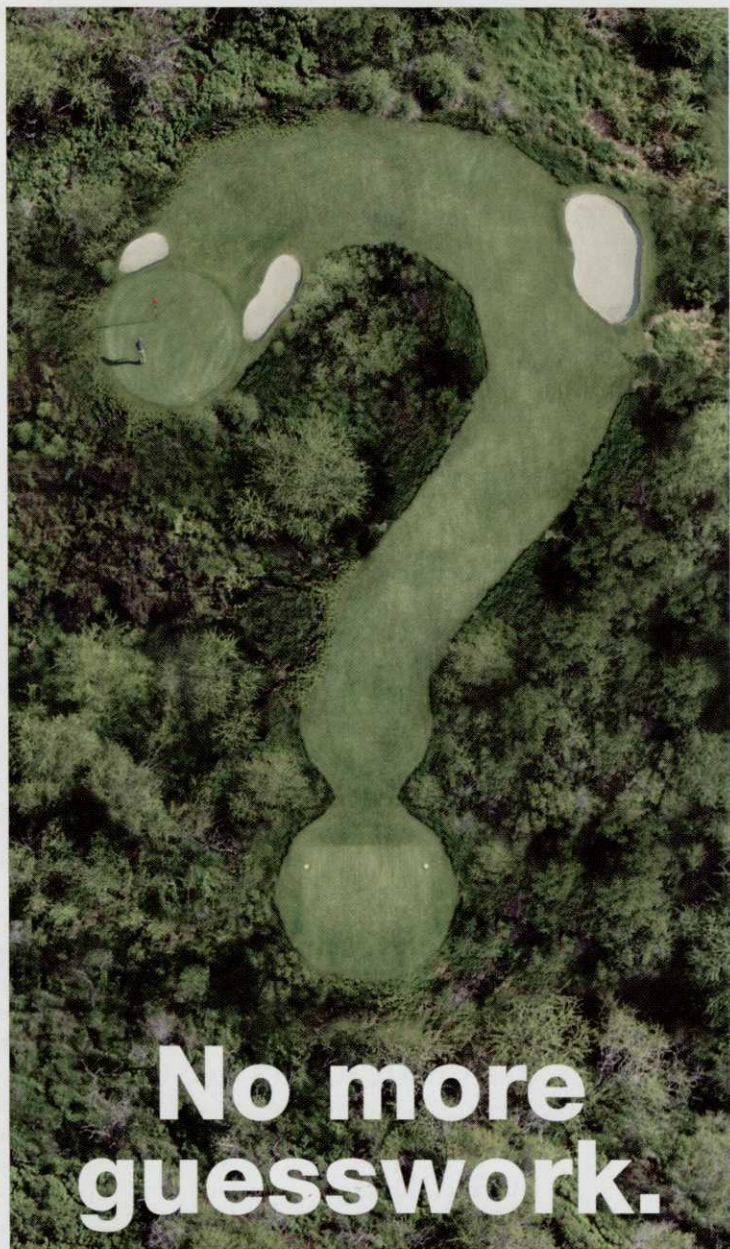
From an academic standpoint, I admire Mike Boehm at Ohio State. He's a great teacher, person and scientist. Eric Nelson from Cornell also is on that list. I'd add my professor from William Rainey Harper, Dr. Metcalf, and Paul Rieke, Joe Vargas and the late Ken Payne from Michigan State.

### Do you think golf will be affected by the new presidential administration led by another Chicago guy?

No matter who's in the job, if the economy doesn't turn around it'll continue to impact us. There are a few things that worry me. Taxes and unions are potential threats. Union shops discourage efficiencies, often raising the cost of doing business, and open voting on unions could lead to many more courses becoming unionized. It would be difficult to see any benefit in that.

Let's face it, the overall model is that wealthy people help drive our economy, support venture capital and contribute to industry. More tax-

*continued on page 49*



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# Rethinking *your operation*

Top agronomic officers seek efficiencies as costs rise and budgets remain flat

**T**he agronomic aspect of golf is the driving force of the business. The big issue at hand is rising costs and flat budgets, which are putting pressure on golf course managers, forcing them to rethink their operations.

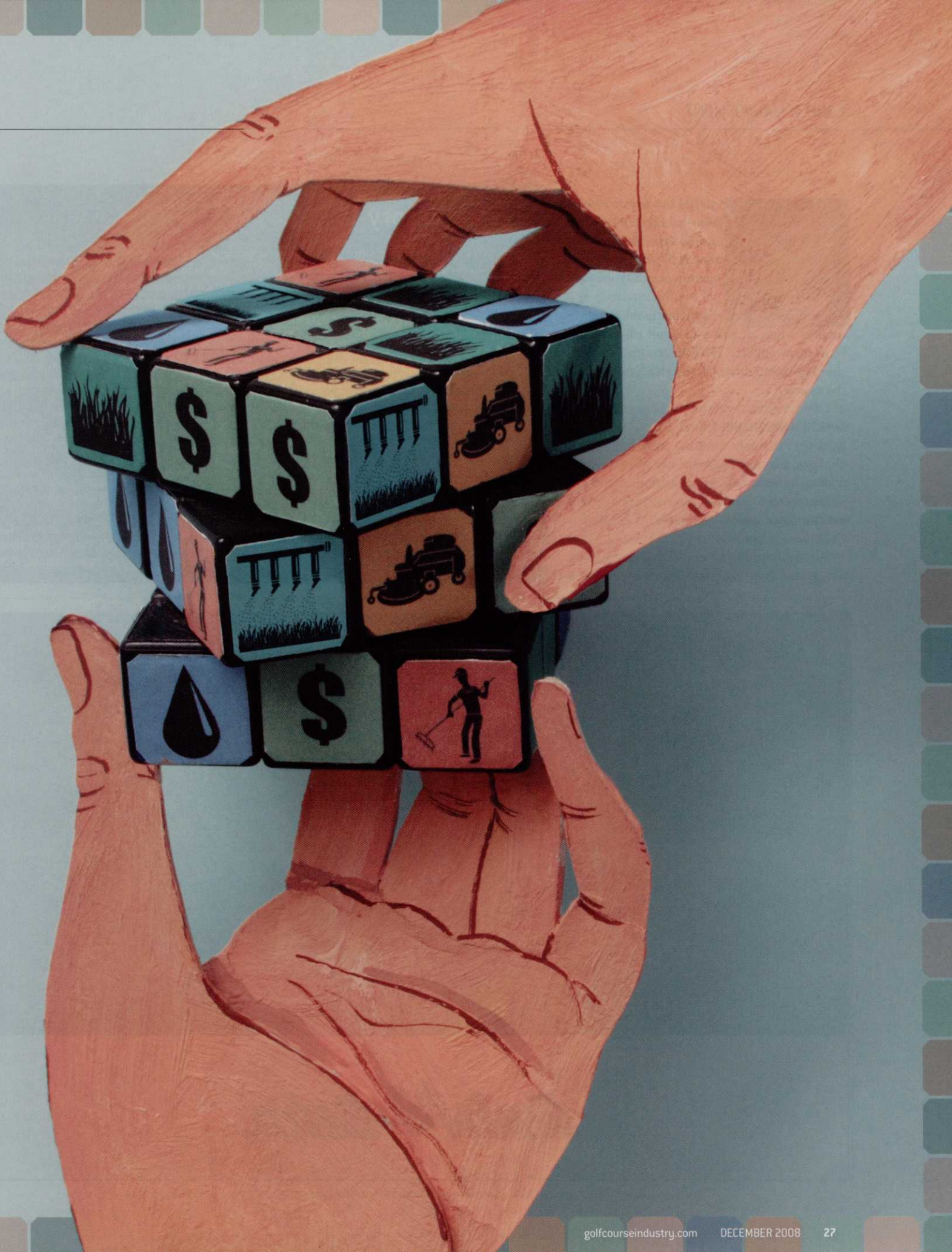
Top agronomic officers of management companies, who meet once a year at the National Golf Course Owners Association's multiowners conference, are addressing that issue. The TAO group consists of between 15 and 20 superintendents representing about 1,200 to 1,500 golf courses throughout the country.

"We found out people do things differently, but sharing ideas in a competitive environment is for the betterment of the industry," says Scott Zakany, president of Championsgate, Fla.-based IGM, a provider of outsourced golf course maintenance services with 45 properties in its portfolio. "We oversee a lot of golf courses and can be a driving force in the industry. You always come across people who think they can do something cheaper and better. And in a flat market, we're always trying get more bang for our buck. We need to be smarter. Everything we do affects the bottom line."

The TAOs wonder where the industry and the courses they operate are going to be in one year, five years and 20 years. But the main issue now is the economy, says Bryan Bielecki, vice president of agronomy for Vienna, Va.-based Billy Casper Golf, which has 100 facilities in its portfolio.

"We were in the process of finalizing budgets for 2009, and it was difficult because of fear in the market," Bielecki says.





Dave Wheeler



Company talks centered on ways to make up for revenue shortfalls – what to cut to drop profit to the bottom line, he says. Skipping fertilizer and soil amendment applications were considered, but these cutbacks only provide short-term savings.

“We looked at reducing labor in the shoulder months when attention to detail isn’t noticed by as many golfers,” Bielecki says. “We’re considering moving that labor to the peak part of the season.”

**TIME TO MAKE CHANGES**

BCG isn’t the only company considering such changes. Having TAOs in one room creates opportunities to influence each other and the industry, says Ray Davies, director of golf course maintenance and construction at Petaluma, Calif.-based CourseCo.

“A time like this is a time for change, meaning things that aren’t acceptable in normal times

**A TAO history** **TAO**

The term “top agronomic officer” might be new to some. The title refers to a superintendent who oversees the maintenance of all golf courses at a management company. TAOs meet once a year at the National Golf Course Owners Association’s multicourse owners conference. Ted Horton, a consulting superintendent who’s part of the senior management team at ValleyCrest Golf Course Maintenance, has been attending the multicourse owners conference since its inception about 12 years ago. At the time, he was working at Pebble Beach Golf Links, which was the location of the first meeting.

“It was all CEOs, and they didn’t have a clue about the environmental effects of what the superintendents were doing,” Horton says. “I gave a brief talk and was asked to come back each year to give an update about the environment.”

The TAOs were pulled together by owners to work on operating problems that affected the industry and explain why operating costs couldn’t be more predictable, says Ray Davies, director of golf course maintenance and construction with Petaluma, Calif.-based CourseCo, which maintains 18 facilities.

“But predictability isn’t possible in golf course maintenance because all golf courses are different,” Davies says. “You have to know a golf course one by one. You can’t group them.”

Owners also wanted the TAOs to seek commonality among themselves.

“They were apprehensive to share information because they felt they were competitors,” Horton says. “They had to get over the fear of sharing information to help one another. The CEOs of these companies felt good the agronomic guys were traveling with them. It’s good team building.” GCI

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might have to be acceptable now," he says, citing less water use and acceptance of brown turf. "We can't have wall-to-wall green turf."

Other examples of change include implementing high-tech irrigation systems, which can save labor, and investing more in solar power.

"Solar power might not cover 100 percent of a facility's power needs, but it will save them money," Davies says. "Golf courses tend not to go away, so they'll have time to get the payback."

The pressure felt during the first few years of the last downturn (2001 to 2003) forced operators to reduce costs in the short-term when, in hindsight, long-term changes needed to be made. Reducing fertilizer and chemical applications, as well as aerification, are examples of short-term savings. Reducing the acreage of highly maintained areas creates long-term savings.

"It's difficult to reduce acreage with a parkland setting because it doesn't mesh well with the course design," Davies says. "But with new courses, you can do whatever you want."

Operators need to start thinking about things such as shutting down nine holes if they're an 18-hole or larger facility if demand isn't there, Davies says.

"You have to manage demand," he says, comparing it to new baseball stadiums that seat 40,000 to 45,000 fans instead of the older stadiums that sat 60,000 to 80,000 fans. "They're controlling price points and demand."

Davies suggests operators look at how and when they buy their equipment to take advantage of opportunities in the marketplace. For example, superintendents should plan what they'll need for the coming year so they can get a deal in the off-season, making one large purchase order – if a club has liquidity. If one doesn't have liquidity, it won't be able to get as good a deal.

When it comes to buying, Zakany says IGM makes sure to get the best price based on volume, which improves profitability.

Davies says CourseCo is questioning its processes to make sure it's allocating its resources properly. The company is challenging basic assumptions to make sure it adjusts to market changes.

"Is it possible to get golfers to accept things they normally wouldn't, such as reduced golf course acreage; watering less, which, in turn, reduces mowing; or drought-tolerant turfgrasses?" he asks. "What does generating 10,000 fewer rounds annually do to the pace of play, which is still an issue? Is your traditional source of labor still the way to go? These are the type of questions we need to be asking ourselves."

It's more challenging to be more efficient, Zakany says, adding that



Bielecki

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there has to be a smarter way to address labor because it eats up 50 to 60 percent of maintenance budgets.

"If you're maintaining a golf course with 20 people, think about how can you do it with 16," he says. "Think about what golfers are going to realize."

BCG is looking at labor and frequency. For example, if it takes 48 hours a week to mow fairways, the company is considering mowing them twice a week instead of three times a week.

Another market change: tournament play, which has declined at the facilities CourseCo maintains. Because of that, the company is aggressively marketing tournament play by interacting with its customers.

"You just can't discount," Davies says. "You can discount to those golfers who wouldn't have come to the course to begin with, but you can't offer a discount to those coming to play golf anyway."

People are worried about deferred capital, too,

Davies says. Money is tight, which is affecting construction, renovation and irrigation projects.

But that can also create opportunities.

"When the construction market declines, you can attract people or builders to do small projects, when normally, they wouldn't look at the projects because they're too small," he says.

Superintendents also need to think differently in terms of delegating and trusting their staffs more, Davies says. Some tasks, such as mowing, might be done better late in the afternoon and early evening, so a superintendent would need to delegate and have people work on the course when he's not there. Davies suggests maybe even having two shifts on staff.

"You have to break the paradigm of 'I have to watch everything,'" he says.

When it comes to cost savings, Bielecki says BCG focuses on water and chemical use.

"Our strategy encourages superintendents to use generics on the tees, fairways and rough and


name brands on the greens," he says. "There are some generics that are just as effective as name brands, but there are other generics that are not. If the residual of some generics is a short time frame, it might cost you more in the long run."

Despite all of BCG's operational suggestions, the company leaves it to superintendents to dictate and meet product expectations.

"The superintendent at each course is the most educated decision-maker based on having input from golfers," Bielecki says. "We feel we're already at peak efficiency operating our golf courses, but we might have to spend less, which would impact product expectations. We start with what product we want. When doing detail work, the question is how often should these tasks be done. We're compromising some of that in the shoulder months."

In a down market, many businesses cut back on marketing, but Bielecki says BCG needs to be

(continued on page 34, sidebar on page 32)




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