

**I**t's a given that grass people talk about grass. When you live the life of a superintendent, analysis of trends and study of direction often is veiled in what looks like gossip. So when Turfheads are talking, I like to listen to what's going on with the Mega-Issues. Here's what I'm hearing about them, and here's what I think:

**Labor** – It takes a special kind of courage to arm an employee with more than \$10,000 in a utility vehicle and walking greens mower and send him or her out to make (and sometimes break) today's greens.

McDonald's is often "now hiring" for more money than many maintenance workers make, and that's a bad thing. Here's the beef: Golf operations must realize that they get what they pay for. Too often, great dreams of amazing greens are covered in the nightmare of labor issues, and poor superintendents are stuck playing Atlas and trying to hold up the world. The issue of labor isn't going away, and everyone is talking about it.

**Supervision** – If you can find enough warm bodies to get the work done, it takes talent to constantly train and supervise those staff members. If we can't get the bucks to pay for good labor, we certainly can't find the money to pay our skilled people adequately. I'm not promoting top-heavy operations, but the days are long over when the superintendent can handle the direction of an entire staff without some leaders on the team. According to many in the field, the solution lies in paying assistant superintendents and foremen or second assistants wages that allow them to think about more than how to get superintendents' positions.

**Education** – We don't have vocational training for wannabe turfheads so they can learn the art of greenkeeping. Instead, we have over-technical turfgrass management programs that are fat on idealism and short on reality.

Equipment managers (mechanics) need training too, and there isn't near enough of that going on. The average bike shop wrench-turner receives more training and schooling than our equipment managers — and that's a shame. What's worse is that the mechanic at my local bike shop makes much more money than the golf course guys in the area.

## My Takes on the Mega-Issues

BY DAVE WILBER



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**Career shortages and the overages** – It's no longer a desirable career goal to be anything less than a superintendent. We haven't helped this situation by paying our second-tier people low wages and spewing some babble at them about "paying dues." In the next few years, it will be hard to fill all the openings for assistants, irrigation techs, spray techs and foremen. The truth is, it's going to be 10 times harder for some of those folks to find a superintendent's position. Some are going to have to embrace the fact that they just aren't cut out to be another Paul Latshaw, no matter how hard they try to punch their tickets to the top.

**Supply issues** – Superintendents are talking a lot about how the sales and distribution of the items they buy has changed. Some companies don't have the local leverage and support that they once had. My hat is off to the handful of independent turfgrass supply distributors and product developers who still do business the old-fashioned way — by earning it. In the end, they will continue to be the favorite choice of turfheads.

**Economic agronomics** – The economy is on everyone's mind. Some superintendents are caught in the middle, and they don't like it. Their facilities have to be maintained. They won't get the revenue any other way than to try to produce the best golf day in and day out. But I see great stuff in the fact that those who can figure out how to do it cheaper and better are going to be on top. That is, if they remember to tell their owners and members that they really did fight a good battle for the money.

In my travels, I hear a lot about specific grass issues. But nothing compares to the volume of these Mega-Issues.

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