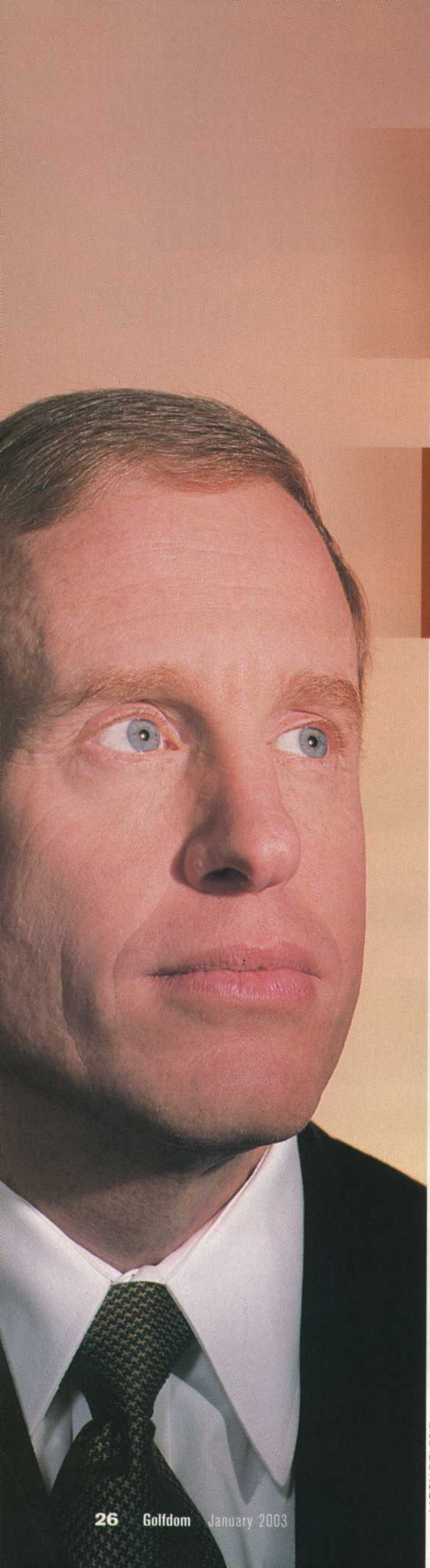


AARON DELESIE

Mona in the Middle

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR

Steve Mona is not one to paint a Pollyannaish picture of the association he leads. He's the first to admit that the GCSAA, which he has led as CEO since late 1993, has plenty to do in its ongoing quest to make working lives better for the thousands of superintendents it represents.

It's not an easy job, especially during the past two years of economic crisis. The GCSAA has experienced two difficult financial years, and its decreased revenues have superintendents talking about the association's financial state. Mona and the association's board of directors caused more chatter among superintendents when they announced they've been exploring the possibility of relocating to a more "golf-centric" location. Throw in even more talk about the GCSAA's discussions with the National Golf Course Owners Association to combine their annual trade shows, and you have enough material to fill an hour on *Meet the Press.*

GCSAA PREVIEW

Economic woes

The GCSAA has grown substantially under Mona in terms of membership and revenue, although the association's progress reflects the industry's growth in the 1990s. The association's revenues were about $13 million when Mona arrived. They topped more than $20 million by the turn of the century.

But Mona says the challenges of running GCSAA as a business are more difficult today than they were nine years ago. That's largely because the golf course maintenance industry has felt the same economic pinch that other industries have felt the past two years, and the GCSAA has not been spared.

Last fall, the GCSAA announced it had a bad fiscal year. Total revenues were $16.7 million, down from $19.7 million the previous year. The asso-

GCSAA CEO Steve Mona faces an array of new challenges, from dealing with declined revenues to possibly moving the association to a new city

ciation reported a bottom-line loss of $802,000, including a net investment loss of about $1.2 million. The association says it has operated below break-even for the last two years.

GCSAA blamed the poor economy and losses in the equity investment market for the decline. Mona says the weak corporate earnings of industry suppliers who scaled back sponsorship of and participation in the association's events affected the GCSAA negatively. Industry support was off nearly $1 million from 2001 to 2002. The GCSAA counts on industry support for more than 50 percent of its revenue.

Because fewer superintendents and exhibitors attended the GCSAA's annual convention last year in Orlando, Fla., user fees were down $150,000. Other income, primarily from investment returns and rental incomes at the association's headquarters, was also down substantially.

"I'm concerned," Mona says of the revenue drop. "I never wanted to be the CEO of an organization that had declining revenues or showed a negative bottom line in a year."

But Mona is quick to say he's not concerned that the revenue drop is a sign that industry players and members have lost confidence in the association.

"This is more reflective of the [poor] economy," he says. "We have to take our lumps like anyone else."

The association is hardly broke. GCSAA says it has total assets of more than $17 million and has no debt.

Mona says the association has made cuts to offset the lost revenue and has reduced operating expenses by more than $2 million. It has reduced conference and show expenditures, cut back on public relations and used more teleconferencing to conduct meetings, among other things.

Mona also says the association will continue to challenge whether it needs to replace an employee if he or she leaves the GCSAA. That means an open position will be scrutinized to see if it can be merged with another position or even eliminated. "That thinking was already going on but has been heightened lately," Mona says.

GCSAA currently employs 116 people. Mona says no layoffs are planned. "But you should never say never," he notes.

Mona says the GCSAA is running lean and mean.

"I believe we've cut the fat but none of the muscle," he says. "But if we have to go much further, we're going to get into some of the muscle."

In addition, Mona says the association is re-examining the services it provides to members.

"We've done a lot more of that the past two years than we did the first seven years I was here," Mona says. "We need to be tough on our programs and services as far as prioritization and making sure there's value in them for our constituents."

Also to offset decreased revenue, the GCSAA announced last summer a proposal for a 20-percent increase in dues beginning July 1 for fiscal year 2003-2004. According to a recent *Golfdom* poll, 33 percent of superintendents said they were against an increase, and another 17 percent said they had reservations about it. Twenty-six percent of superintendents said they agreed with the proposal.

Mona says the increase is needed to sustain existing programs. But some superintendents claim the increase was instituted to help fund implementation of the Professional Development Initiative, which begins in July.

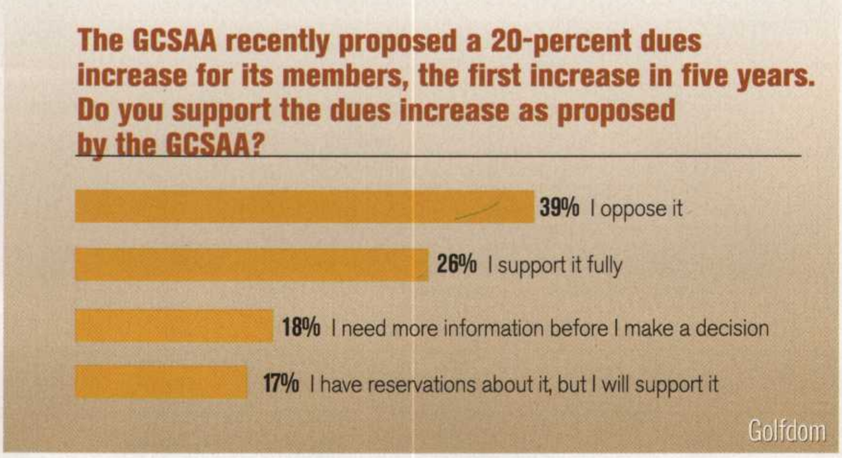
"That is absolutely not the case," Mona says. "What happened to us is the [poor] economy happened to us."

The association has made it clear that existing programs and services will be affected if the dues increase is not passed when voted on next month at the annual convention and show in Atlanta.

Speaking of Atlanta, Mona does not plan for the show-floor aisles to be packed with conference exhibitors and attendees in February. He knows attendance in Atlanta will be down even from last year's show in Orlando, which came on the heels of Sept. 11 and was understandably down in attendance from the previous year in Dallas. While Mona understands the situation, it's not easy to take. "This is unusual for us because typically [attendance] has gone up, up, up," he says.

There are two reasons why fewer superintendents will attend the show — the economy and the city. Because many courses felt a financial pinch in 2002, they won't send their superintendents to the show. The fact that the show is in Atlanta, no longer regarded as the trendy "Hotlanta" (especially in February), makes it even less attractive.

Continued on page 28



Continued from page 27

"By far and away, the No. 1 reason [for the low attendance] will be the economy," Mona says. "Some management companies used to send all their superintendents to the show on the corporate nickel and pay for their registration, travel, lodging and meals. But they have eliminated that.

"But very candidly, Atlanta is not perceived as an attractive site," Mona adds. "[In February], the weather can be questionable."

Mona hopes the GCSAA can hit its projected number for show exhibitors and attendees. "But if we do, it won't be by much."

Regarding the show, GCSAA is not hiding the fact that it's negotiating with the National Golf Course Owners Association to combine their annual shows.

"Both groups have agreed in principal to put the shows together," Mona says. "The devil is in the details, but we both have the will to get it done."

Mona says a joint trade show won't happen any sooner that 2005. The idea to combine the show is based on economics, career advancement and synergies between the groups' educational programs.

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"A lot of companies exhibit at both shows," Mona says. "From our perspective, the employers of superintendents are a group we've wanted to get at our show for years."

Mona believes owners would have a greater appreciation of superintendents after they saw "the professionalism and size and scope of our industry."

"Some of our members are also interested in educational programming designed to help them possibly pursue general manager careers," Mona says. "NGCOA is a group that makes sense for us to partner with because a lot of its education is in that area."

Of course, a big topic of conversation these days has to do with the association considering a move to another city. The GCSAA is studying its options with the assistance of FPL Associates LP, a Chicago-based firm. The association has spent about $84,000 to date in exploring the feasibility of a move. No deals have been made, and in the end Mona says the association may discover that Lawrence, Kan., is the best place for it to be.

Not immune to criticism

It goes without saying that the 45-year-old Mona feels pressure. But what association executive doesn't feel the pressure that comes with trying to appease more than 22,000 members?

Mona has helped the association grow in many ways. He has emphasized education and career advancement for superintendents. Under Mona, superintendents have gained more positive recognition for their roles from industry peers and golfers

According to a recent *Golfdom* poll of more than 110 superintendents, 30 percent said they are "very satisfied" with how well GCSAA serves their needs. Thirty-six percent said they are "somewhat satisfied," and 19 percent said they are "OK" with the GCSAA. That's an 85-percent approval rating.

The perception is that Mona, known for his candor and friendliness, is well-liked by the GCSAA's members. In his modest tone, Mona agrees that many members are satisfied with the job he's done.

"I can only answer that on the feedback I get, and for the most part it's positive," Mona says unassumingly. "When I talk with people, they tell me they appreciate what we're doing."

But Mona knows better than to get caught up in accolades — and for good reason. For instance, Mona says the GCSAA's visibility has increased significantly under his tenure. He's proud of that, but more visibility also brings more scrutiny and criticism, he notes.

"It comes with the territory," Mona says. "I'm not immune to criticism, and it's something I've had to learn to live with and adapt to."

Mona knows he can't always please each association member, but that doesn't mean he doesn't try. "I'm a person by nature who likes to please people, and I always look for solutions to problems that meet the needs of both parties involved."

Mona wants to be in touch. He says he regularly reads the GCSAA online forums. He receives about 150 e-mails a day and responds to many of them.

Mona has heard the talk that the association's critics comprise a small minority of superintendents, but he doesn't hide behind the assessment.

"I don't look at it that way," Mona says. "Anybody who's a member of this organization has a right to say how he or she feels about something."

Simply, Mona says he won't turn his ear from even the most perennial critic. "I don't consider anybody in this organization to be a crackpot who doesn't deserve to be listened to," he says firmly. ■

Aylward, the author of this story, can be reached at laylward@advanstar.com