



Make the Connection

Long-term strategic plans are vital to superintendents' jobs, and they can streamline the budget process

BY FRANK H. ANDORKA JR., MANAGING EDITOR

Dan Dinelli, certified superintendent at North Shore CC in Glenview, Ill., convened a meeting with his board of directors, his grounds and greens Committee, and golf pro in 1995. The goal was to create a long-term strategic plan for the course to ensure its continued improvement.

He says his decision followed a family tradition — passed down from one generation of Dinelli superintendents to the next — based on a long-ago adage he learned at his grandfather's knee.

"My grandfather [who worked at Northmoor CC in the Chicago area from 1922-1971] told me there were two things a superintendent should never be without," Dinelli says. "One was a putting green nursery for testing new products and making repairs. The second was a long-range plan. I had the putting green already, so I decided to create a strategic plan to complete the circle."

Creating a strategic plan — and tying it to specific budget numbers — can be a daunting task for superintendents. With so many variables, from the weather to a tough economy to political infighting in the clubhouse, the idea of setting a schedule beyond the next board meeting may seem like folly.

But it doesn't have to be that way. For most superintendents who've

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created strategic plans, it makes them more secure during the budgeting process. Strategic plans can boost superintendents' credibility with boards and provide continuity when bosses change (and make superintendents less susceptible to the whims of capricious *new* bosses). The plans encourage collective decision-making, meaning superintendents have a better idea what's expected of them from year to year. Finally, strategic plans give superintendents leverage around budget time. After all, it's harder for the board to deny superintendents the funds to complete strategic projects that everyone agreed to beforehand.

Lead by example

John Miller, certified superintendent at The Golf Club at Yankee Trace in Centerville, Ohio, occasionally teaches a class at the GCSAA Con-

ference and Show called "Planning Your Way to Better Golf Operations." During the seminar, he discusses the paralysis that can grip courses if superintendents wait for somebody else to start the process of creating a strategic plan.

"Superintendents' bosses aren't always quick to jump on the idea of strategic plans because it's not a priority for them," Miller says. "If you can't get anyone above you interested, create your own long-term strategic plan for the maintenance shop. Once your operations become more efficient, you'll peak the interest of those to whom you report."

Miller's most recent foray into strategic planning came after he joined Yankee Trace in 1993. He arrived during a period when the municipal course was having trouble getting financial information from the city administration. In 1997, Miller decided to implement a strategic plan to streamline the process. A

Should You Have a Standard Operating Procedures Manual?

It's an idea that strikes fear into the hearts of some superintendents: putting on paper exactly what they do to keep the golf course in top shape. They fear that the information backs them into a corner and lays the groundwork for them to be fired if they're unable to maintain the course by the book.

But superintendents who've taken the time to create standard operating procedure (SOP) manuals dismiss those fears, saying instead that the documents have saved them numerous arguments with their bosses over the years.

"Our SOP wasn't developed to be used against me," says Steve Hammon, superintendent of Traverse City (Mich.) Golf & CC. "It diffuses any political issues because the requirements of my job are there in black and white."

SOP manuals come in handy when superintendents are arguing for money to increase staff or replace equipment, says Dan Dinelli, certified superintendent of North Shore CC in Glenview, Ill., who supports putting together as detailed a maintenance manual as possible. In his manual, he publishes a typical weekly schedule on what maintenance tasks are done and how many hours each job takes. He makes the SOP manual available to golfers.

"It's a real eye-opener for most golfers to see what we do during the course of a week," Dinelli says. "It shows a level of professionalism and planning to the golfers. It also helps explain what procedures we're doing and why."

Rick Tatum, director of golf operations at Grey Oaks CC in Naples, Fla., says superintendents should engage the help of the USGA Green Section in developing manuals.

"It gives the book legitimacy in the eyes of golfers if there's an outside agency involved," Tatum says. "The Green Section agronomist can tell your golfers exactly what the standard is for the golf course and list everything necessary to do the job properly, including staff numbers and equipment"

Dinelli says an SOP manual also provides superintendents with ammunition during the annual budget battles.

"If tasks are laid out and specifics of what it takes to get the job done are there for everyone to see, you can make a more forceful argument for funding levels commensurate with what you have to do," Dinelli says. "If they ask you for cuts in your budget, you can ask them which procedures they'd like you to eliminate. It forces them to make the decision, not you."

Could a SOP manual back a superintendent into a corner if Mother Nature decides to deluge his course with rain for four straight weeks, vandals strike it or the pro decides to hold four previously unscheduled events to drive revenues? Tatum says no.

"Most people are reasonable," Tatum says. "If you can explain what caused you to deviate from the schedule, they're pretty forgiving."

Dinelli agrees.

"In fact, an SOP is a huge plus," he says. "If the board comes to you and says, 'You fell short on your maintenance procedures on these three days; you can more easily defend yourself by explaining what happened on those days that prevented you from doing what you planned to do. It's a great backup.'"

— Frank H. Andorka Jr., Managing Editor

goal of the plan was to obtain more frequent financial reports.

"[The administration] only gave us numbers every six weeks, which made it difficult to make adjustments on the fly," Miller says. "You never knew whether to spend money on a project or not because you weren't sure what the revenues were. We finally took the initiative and asked for the financials more often."

The result is that Miller now gets real-time financial data, which allows him to keep closer tabs on expenditures. It allows him to be more nimble financially and keep his budget on track. In these economically difficult times, such management is crucial.

"We accomplished the first piece of our strategic plan quickly," Miller says. "That's made the other pieces of the puzzle easier to achieve."

Getting started

The first step is to identify the crucial

SUPERINTENDENTS LOVE IT WHEN PLANS COME TOGETHER

Golfdom recently conducted an online poll that drew 95 responses. It asked, "Do you have a long-term strategic plan for your golf course, a standard operating procedures manual, both or neither?"

Long-term strategic plan	18%
Standard operating procedures manual	16%
Both	31%
Neither	36%

Golfdom

members of the course who need to be involved in composing a plan, Miller says. The list often includes the owner, board of directors, professional and other department heads.

"A strategic plan is crucial to making sure everyone has the same idea of where the course is currently and where it wants to go in the future," says Rick Tatum, director of operations for Grey Oaks CC

in Naples, Fla. "Without a plan, the superintendent is going to be jumping left, right and center as new green chairmen enter the picture. A strategic plan codifies where you want to go and smoothes out some of those transitions."

Dinelli says superintendents shouldn't underestimate the importance of creating a mission statement as the first step of a plan. It should include goals from the different constituencies at the course, including golfers. It puts everyone on record about exactly what they expect of the course from conditioning and management perspectives.

The object of a mission statement is to get everyone to agree where the course needs to go, Miller says. It should define where the course has been in the past, where it stands now and where it should be within a specified time. He said it took the management team at Yankee Trace nearly a year to come up with one.

"It's time-consuming, but it's better for everyone if you do it carefully," Miller says. "You want to address the concerns of everyone at the course. It should be collaborative and it will help bring everyone together."

Dinelli also recommends getting a third-party (like an architect or the USGA Green Section) to help write the mission statement and plan, particularly if there are going to be renovations involved.

"It makes it more objective if you have outside help," Dinelli says. "It also means you've invested real money in

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Strategic Planning

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the plan if you hire someone to shepherd the project. Once the money is spent, it's harder for future boards to disavow it."

What should be in it

The strategic plan should have as many details as possible, Miller says. It should clearly define who has responsibility for each piece of overall club management. Getting into the minutiae of clubhouse management may seem unnecessary to superintendents, but a clear division of labor is critical to a smooth-operating club.

Miller talks about one specific area of responsibility that was outlined in his strategic plan: changing the light bulb in the hallway between the restaurant and the pro shop. It seems like a small point — when the light bulb burned out, someone should have changed it. But it rarely got done because no one had ever decided which department was responsible. The strategic plan assigned responsibility for the job, and now the light bulb doesn't remain unchanged for days.

"It's a small point, but it's one of those little things that needs to be done to make the course run at its optimum efficiency and professionalism," Miller says. "Golfers notice those things. The issues you address during strategic planning can be as simple as that, but they should also focus on longer-term goals as well."

Strategic plans take some of the guesswork out of superintendents' lives, Tatum says. "With a plan, you don't have to say to yourself after each project is done, 'What's next?' You'll already know."

While details are vital to the success of the plan, it's also important not to commit to unrealistic goals. The group should create a list of the top 10 priorities for the course after getting everyone's input, Miller says. Further discussions should whittle it down to the three or four most important goals. Those priorities provide the basis for a three- to five-year strategic plan, although the actual length of a plan will depend on the course, he adds.

COST ESTIMATING and PHASING PLAN

NORTH SHORE CC (REPRODUCTION OF ACTUAL PAGE FROM PLAN)

Unit Price Estimate

Construction Task	Unit Price
New tee development	\$1/square foot
Existing tee leveling	\$1.10/square foot
Contour fairway (strip and replace sod)	\$6/square foot
Bunker construction/renovation	\$1.15/square foot
USGA greens construction	\$35,000 (avg.)/green
Green resurfacing	42 cents/square foot
Topsoil	\$10/cubic yard
Excavation (cut/fill on-site)	\$1.70/cubic yard
Fill material (off-site)	\$7/cubic yard
Shaping (small dozer)	\$1,000/day
Existing cart path removal	\$2.50/linear foot
Proposed cart path construction (8-foot width)	\$10/linear foot
Proposed cart path construction (10-foot width)	\$11.75/linear foot
Slope/lake bank stabilization	\$3.75/square yard
Irrigation installation	\$500,000 (installed)
Drainage inlet (12 inches by 12 inches)	\$135 each
Level existing drainage inlets	In-house
Catch basin (18 inches)	\$250 each
Catch basin (24 inches)	\$750 each
4-inch solid polyethylene (ADS Type)	\$4.40/linear foot
4-inch perforated polyethylene (ADS Type)	\$5.60/linear foot
6-inch solid polyethylene (ADS Type)	\$5.60/linear foot
8-inch solid polyethylene (ADS Type)	\$7/linear foot
10-inch solid polyethylene (ADS Type)	\$9/linear foot
12-inch solid polyethylene (ADS Type)	\$11.50/linear foot
15-inch solid polyethylene (ADS Type)	\$13.50/linear foot
18-inch corrugated metal pipe	\$16/linear foot
Native grass/wildflower plantings	\$1,000/acre
Sod	\$2.50/square yard
6-foot shade tree	\$700 each
10-foot ornamental tree	\$600 each
10-foot evergreen tree	\$750 each
Lightning protection	\$1,250/tree
Annual pruning service	\$20,000/year

"You break the plans into short-term and long-term goals," Miller says. "Keep the goals in manageable chunks. Otherwise, it can get too overwhelming."

The list may change as the course evolves, but the basic goals should remain the same, Miller says. He prefers working on one project from start to finish before moving down the list, but he's flexible. "If I can figure out how to do more than one project at a time, I'll do it."

And about budgeting for these long-term plans? Miller says it's important to include detailed dollar amounts for each project.

"You don't want to commit to any long-term project without making sure you can tell the interested parties how much it's going to cost," Miller says. "The last thing you want to have happen at the end of this process is for anyone to be surprised at a dollar figure."

Tatum says that budgetary consider-

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JOHN MILLER

THE GOLF CLUB AT YANKEE TRACE

ations will end up determining the exact length of the plan. It means more work for superintendents on the front end. Research the proposed projects and find out what they will cost as precisely as possible, Miller says. Call colleagues who have done similar projects to find out how much money they spent. In the end, such due diligence will help superintendents.

"The beauty of the process is that

everyone — the general manager, the food and beverage manager, the owner — will have committed to the plan by the time it's over," Miller says. "It allows superintendents to justify budget requests more easily. If they choose not to give you the money, you can point to the plan and explain to them what won't get done because of their decision. It can be compelling for them."

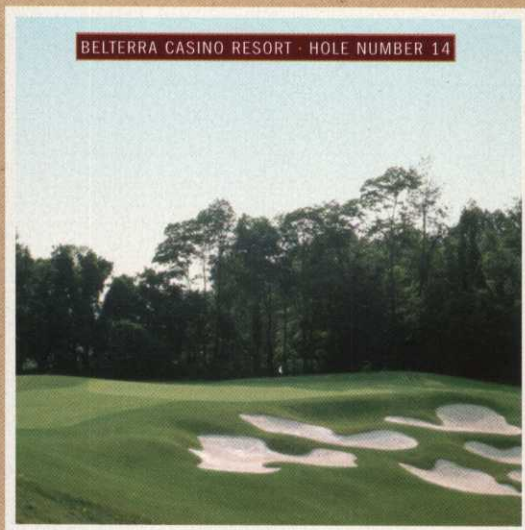
Tatum said achieving consensus on priorities is essential to keeping the lines of communication open as the plan moves forward.

"In essence, what you're telling the powers that be is, 'Your goals are now my goals,'" Tatum says. "It makes the working relationship smoother."

Implementation is up to you

Once the plan is laid out, how it gets implemented is up to the group, Dinelli says.

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"For each new year, you'll have X amount of money to spend on capital projects," Dinelli says. "You can juggle the projects depending on what you have funds for at the time. It's a great road map, but it has to allow for some flexibility."

Miller says keeping slavishly to the

exact schedule laid out in the strategic plan is unnecessary. If there's not enough money in the budget to do the scheduled project, find one in the plan that *is* fundable and do it first. He understands the financial situation of clubs can change from year to year, and the strategic plan should never become a straightjacket.

"It's OK to move items around during the actual implementation," Miller says. "As long as everyone has agreed to the outlines of how to get the course from point A to point B, the implementation can be flexible."

If a club decides to phase in projects to spread out the financial burden over several years, it should choose

COST ESTIMATE and PHASING PLAN SUMMARY

NORTH SHORE CC (REPRODUCTION OF ACTUAL PAGE FROM PLAN)

Golf Course Strategic Preservation Plan

Hole	Phase I 1996	Phase II 1997	Phase III 1998	Phase IV 1999	Phase V 2000	Total
1		\$7,450	\$ 10,650	\$8,000		\$26,100
2		\$7,290	\$7,500	\$3,100		\$17,890
3		\$250	\$10,300			\$10,550
4		\$5,280	\$6,400	\$700		\$12,380
5		\$7,150	\$6,800	\$1,500		\$15,450
6		\$9,890	\$3,650	\$1,300		\$14,840
7		\$4,400	\$8,100	\$3,200		\$15,700
8		\$13,290		\$650		\$13,940
9		\$9,115	\$5,500	\$1,500		\$16,115
10		\$1,570	\$14,350	\$2,300		\$18,220
11		\$700	\$1,600	\$6,500		\$8,800
12		\$4,875	\$7,075	\$3,900		\$15,850
13		\$2,075	\$15,850		\$500	\$18,425
14		\$2,300	\$1,600		\$350	\$4,250
15		\$830	\$25,600	\$4,200	\$2,100	\$32,730
16		\$1,745	\$10,475			\$12,200
17		\$4,480	\$10,100	\$2,000		\$16,580
18		\$3,725	\$9,100	\$1,700		\$14,525
General Improvements	\$32,500	\$15,000				
Annual Tree Maintenance	\$20,000	\$20,000	\$20,000	\$20,000	\$20,000	\$100,000
Practice Range	\$36,950					\$36,950
Irrigation System	\$10,000			\$500,000		\$510,000
USGA Green Construction		\$41,650		\$315,000	\$315,000	\$671,650
Total	\$99,450	\$163,065	\$174,650	\$875,550	\$337,950	\$1,650,665

Note: Regrassing greens rather than rebuilding greens to USGA specifications will reduce the total cost of improvements to \$1,083,665, a reduction of \$567,000.

those projects carefully, Dinelli says. Some projects, like redoing bunkers, are easily phased in. Installing a new irrigation system, however, is something Dinelli believes should be done at one time.

He also recommends "piggybacking" projects on one another when feasible. If you need to dredge your ponds and have areas of the course that don't

drain well because they're too low, it makes sense to use the soil dredged from the pond as fill for the other project.

"You look to create synergies between different projects," Dinelli says. "It's often easier to sell projects to the membership that way."

Dinelli says that following his grand-

father's advice was one of the best decisions he's made since he's been at North Shore.

"It softens any thoughts among the members that I'm making decisions in a vacuum, without input from everyone at the club," Dinelli says. "It's been one of most useful tools I've had, and I'm glad I did it." ■

HOT PRODUCTS

If you're planning your 2004 budget, you might be able to use these products. Check them out on page 87.

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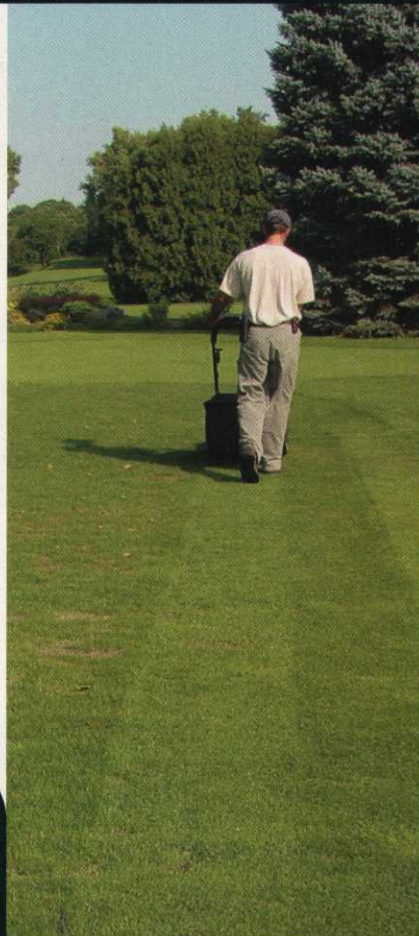
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