He Stands A-gas-t!

Fuel prices have superintendent's head spinning when it comes to keeping his maintenance budget. What to do?

By Ron Furlong, Contributing Editor

Pumping gas recently into the family minivan, I passed the $10 level without even noticing, the $20 plateau with a bored and insignificant yawn, the $30 mark without a blink, the $40 figure with only a slight raise of an eyebrow, and then the magical and before not even thinkable half-century mark with a strange, almost bemused kind of deranged look on my face. I know I had this look because I caught a glimpse of it in the reflection from the driver's-side window (scared me a little), and also because my wife rolled the window down and asked what in the heck was wrong with me. She thought I might be having a stroke.

The grand total was $56.65. A new record! I was so proud. I can only hope to someday hit the $60 mark! With a little luck I might get there this summer.

Where is this all headed? Higher? Have we peaked? Depends on which expert you listen to and what you choose to read. Some theories are more positive than others about the future of fuel prices, so if you want you can pick and choose and make yourself feel better – or make yourself feel worse, I suppose, if that is your goal.

It's kind of like the local weather. There is one channel that is notorious for its positive forecast, while another channel is infamous for its constant negativity. I tend to go for the third channel, which seems to toe each line. Just give me the facts. I can take it.

Of course, we don't need experts to tell us just what these skyrocketing fuel prices are doing to our budgets at work (or at home, for that matter). And of course it doesn't stop with just fuel. Fertilizer prices are up because it costs more to manufacture. In fact, almost anything that has to be trucked to you or that is made with a fuel or an oil-based product has gone up. Sand, gravel, chemicals, seed, oils – nothing is immune.

How do we budget for line items that go up 15 percent to 30 percent? It's been hard enough in recent years with health insurance increasing this much every year, but now to have more traditional golf course maintenance line items affected like

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Bearing the Brunt

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Irrigation equipment is on the rise, too. Older brass fittings are being pilfered around the country, and their predominantly plastic replacements are more expensive to manufacture because of escalating oil prices.

Materials for irrigation installations are about 25 percent higher since 2005, says Dave Davis, president of the American Society of Irrigation Consultants and proprietor of David D. Davis & Associates. Much of the rise is imbedded in polyvinyl chloride pipe — which rose about 70 percent in the past few years — and of course, wiring for controllers, which fluctuates depending on the price of copper on any given day. PVC is following in copper's footsteps, he says.

"You can't even get a quote for PVC anymore," Davis says. "They basically tell us what we'll be paying when you get to the dock to pick it up."

Trickle-down effect

With prices for the full gamut of golf course materials fluctuating on the whim of market investors, bids for work at the club level require a significant contingency fund to keep costs in line with expectations.

"We don't know day to day what prices will be when doing bids," says Bob Pinson, president of the Golf Course Builders Association and president of Course Crafters. "There have been a lot of clubs that have decided not to do their projects because of escalating prices and fear of losing memberships because of assessments. So there have been a few clubs on our radar during the past couple of years that were committed to doing projects, and then they just put the brakes on."

Pinson's experiences mirror the widespread reality that golf courses are postponing renovation projects in hopes that commodity and construction prices are inflated because investors are funneling money into the futures markets.

Turfgrass, too, is caught in the same web. Growers must pass along the increases in fertilizers needed to maintain sod farms and seed production. And seed growers must compete with government-subsidized and lucrative crops, including corn, wheat, alfalfa and

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this is almost too much to handle. Even labor costs more because cost of living is rising at a nontraditional level.

So, the magic question is: How do we keep the budget at a level that will be acceptable to the powers that be? Or, perhaps a better magic question: How do we increase the line items for these now suddenly more-expensive things while keeping the budget at an acceptable level?

Sorry, but those were rhetorical questions. I don't have the answers. In fact, if anyone has the answers please let me know. Let us all know! We'll put you on the cover of *Golfdom* and anoint you Superintendent of the Year.

Perhaps the answers lie in cutting budgets and lowering expectations. Perhaps the answers are finding ways to increase revenue and attract more people to the game of golf. But this might be hard to do if we lower standards across the board.

Maybe, and this is more than likely in the neighborhood of being on the right track, the answers will be a combination of the above. Cutting back (slightly) in some areas,

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which will keep the budget from increasing astronomically, while also finding ways to get more golfers onto the golf course. But this will be tricky. Remember, those people you're trying to attract to the golf course have to drive their cars, or worse, their gas-guzzling SUVs to the golf course. This will require them to put the precious fuel (why am I reminded of the great 1981 Mel Gibson movie, "The Road Warrior," here?) into their vehicles to drive to your golf course. And filling up on that precious and expensive fuel, which means they will have less money than they did before, will bring into their minds the horrible question: Do I really want to be throwing my money away on golf?

We all better hope their answer is "yes." And it is up to us to make sure the answer is "yes." How do we do this? Anyone? Don't be shy. Nothing comes to mind? Well, that's probably because, traditionally, it has not been in the superintendent's mindset to consider how to attract golfers to the course. We've got enough on our plates, right? We put out the great product, and the golfers come to golf. It's always been so easy. If you build it, they will come. But the playing field has changed a bit. We still have to put out the great product, but maybe we have to do our part to make sure someone is playing on it. There is almost nothing as sad as having the golf course in perfect condition and no one is there to see it or experience it. If a green is rolling perfectly but no one putts on it, does it make a sound?

So, how do we help attract golfers? I think the most obvious thing for a superintendent is communicating with the local schools in your area and organizing class field trips. Talk to the kids. Not only about golf course maintenance, but golf in general. Get them interested and aware of golf at an early age. Another thing would be to sit in on advertising meetings at your club. Give your input. No one knows the golf course at your facility better than you. Your suggestions in advertising hold as much water as anyone's suggestion. But in doing these "recruiting" things, please keep in mind it is not exactly in our job description. We can't let the golf course suffer by spending too much time trying to populate the golf course. The best way for a golf course superintendent to attract golfers is to provide a great golf course.

The other tool we have in fighting these crazy fuel prices is maneuvering our budgets around so as to spend more money on fuel (we have no choice), but less

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canola, resulting in fewer acres of turfgrass seed being planted, which could create a supply shortage, says Kevin Turner, director of seed research and production for The Scotts Co. Total bluegrass acres planted are about half of what they were five years ago, Turner says, and fine fescue acres are a tad lower than normal.

"The price of grass seed is going to change," Turner told growers at the company's field day in late June. "We're looking at probably strong price increases in bluegrass and fine fescues, and smaller increases on ryegrasses and tall fescues."

Incremental price increases in so many products are inhibiting many renovation projects around the country as clubs re-evaluate the timing of renovation and construction projects.

About 41 percent of respondents to a recent online *Golfdom* survey said they are canceling, postponing or scaling back renovation projects because building materials and construction costs are so expensive. About 22 percent said they are accelerating their construction timeline before costs climb any more, and 38 percent said prices have no effect on what needs to be done around the facility.

Expenses for most renovation materials have escalated 50 percent to 100 percent since 2005, Pinson says, and much of the upward movement has occurred during the past six months.

Most of the cancelled projects involve routine upgrades to greens, tees and bunkers, sources say. Clubs looking for major changes likely have gone through the renovation process out of necessity. But many of them are handling it in a different way.

At Southern Hills Country Club in Tulsa, Okla., General Manager Nick Sedorakis put together a 10-year plan to upgrade facilities. The golf course was scheduled for completion prior to last year's PGA Championship, but the facelifts for parts of the property were originally slated for several phases. Then costs began to climb in 2005, just as the historic club entrenched itself in the procurement process for the renovation's multiple phases.

Supplies soared, largely because of demand from emerging economies in China, India and

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on a few other things. For instance, we create larger no-mow zones to use less fuel, and in turn reduce labor. We tolerate some weeds in the rough. We use more plant growth regulators throughout the golf course to decrease mowing frequency. Again, this will help mitigate fuel costs and save labor as well. Let's face it: There is no bigger line item in any budget than labor. It is the most gluttonous of all line items, and being able to cut it back will be more cost effective than any other tool you have.

We can no longer rely on some of the traditional methods of golf course maintenance that we were taught. They worked for their time, but they are not going to work in the future. The world is changing. High fuel prices are basically the poster child for change. It's the red flag for all of us to see. But it's only one sign of change.

It is not in and of itself our future, but it is a sign for all of us to recognize that the future is going to be different. This, I think, may not be such a bad thing, in the end.

Driving down the freeway the other day I passed a fuel tanker driving in the slower lane and again I couldn't help but picture Mel Gibson behind the wheel fending off the crazed barbarians determined to steal his precious fuel. The driver gave me a strange look, wondering no doubt why I was staring at his truck. Of course, if you've seen "The Road Warrior" (great cult classic), you know the fuel isn't in the truck anyway. It's hidden in barrels in the buses. Poor Mel. Unbeknownst to him, he was just a decoy. I was tempted to shout to the poor guy driving the semi that the fuel wasn't in the tanker, it was hidden in the buses, but I was afraid he'd misunderstand and squash my Honda Civic like a bug.

Ay yi yi, let's hope this in not our future. But, just in case, you might want to hide a couple barrels of unleaded behind the shop. You never know. ■

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other countries that were developing quickly. Concrete rose $25 per yard, drywall tripled in price, and copper wire rose about tenfold in two weeks, Sedorakis recalls.

The inflated expenses almost decimated his 20 percent contingency fund within the first two years of the project.

"Our construction manager came to us with a 30 percent differential on the original bid just six months to eight months into the project because prices were going through the roof," Sedorakis says.

At that rate, the overhaul would have exceeded projections if he continued on the 10-year path. Instead, Sedorakis accelerated plans so the club would finish the entire refurbishment before the PGA.

"The $22-million project probably would be a $30-million project right now," he says.

He dodged a bullet, but the reprieve was short-lived. As most golf operators know,

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