

Budget CRUNCH

Maintenance costs are soaring, but golfers' expectations for superb conditions remain the same. What's a superintendent to do?

BY LARRY AYLWARD
EDITOR IN CHIEF

Excuse me, Mr. Golf Course Superintendent, but is that your maintenance budget circling the drain?

While I know it's not easy for you to watch the money being sucked out of your operation, you can take comfort in knowing that you're not alone. Superintendents from across the land are lamenting about their maintenance budgets gone awry. Sharp increases in fuel prices — which seem to affect about everything from the cost of fertilizer to the price of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich — have thrown most everyone's financial situations out of whack.

And pardon me for saying this, Mr. Golf Course Superintendent, but you look a little green under the gills. And not "green" as in lush-green turf. You look "green" as in sick.

Maybe it's because the boss man — whether it's your owner, general manager, green committee chairman and/or members/golfers — expect you to deliver the ultimate

in turf conditions despite your blown budget. They don't care that you budgeted three bucks for a gallon of fuel for 2008, and you've been paying up to and more than four bucks since June. They also don't care that your budget has been battered because of other increased costs, such as the surcharge you must pay for a delivery of topdressing sand — a charge that costs more than the product itself!

"Costs are going through the roof, and you're being asked to do more with less," says Certified Golf Course Superintendent Don Sutton, a sales manager for AmegaA Sciences, a manufacturer of wetting agents, colorants and other turf products.

Of course, how to do more with less is the \$64-million question.

Sutton previously worked at a club where maintenance expenses had increased dramatically, but the club's brass still wanted the finest-looking course in town. But Sutton says he wasn't allowed to go over budget to continue giving them the look that they were accustomed, despite being hamstrung by high prices ranging from gas to fertilizer — items for which he had budgeted much less only to see their prices rise rapidly.

It's a difficult situation for a superintendent to be in because the superintendent is the last person who wants to see the course's conditions suffer, Sutton says.

“A lot of us are in this because of the pride we have for the products we put out every day,” Sutton says.

There are some things superintendents can do to stay within budget without sacrificing the course’s looks, which is the key to solving this dilemma. At The Olde Farm Golf Club in Bristol, Va., General Manager Marc Eubanks says the maintenance staff is spraying more plant growth regulators to reduce mowing. This is probably nothing superintendents haven’t heard before, but it seems more of them are doing this to reduce costs without sacrificing quality.

“We’re down to mowing fairways once a week, but you would never know it,” Eubanks says. “You just find a way to get more efficient at your job so you can offset these increasing operational costs.”

Mitchell Wilkerson, the certified golf course superintendent of Moss Creek Golf Club in Bluffton, S.C., says combatting budget problems equates to creating efficiencies to stay within budget. To Wilkerson, time is money. Hence, he’s taking a few different approaches to reduce time spent on certain tasks to save money. For instance, Wilkerson is cutting down the time it takes to complete projects that involve fuel, such as mowing and mechanical bunker raking. Regarding the latter, Wilkerson has instructed his crew to inspect bunkers before raking them, which they would normally rake if the bunkers needed it or not. But if a bunker can get by another day without being raked, the crew doesn’t rake it.

While he’s paying more for it, Mitchell has been able to use less fuel. “We’re saving 5 percent to 6 percent a month in fuel costs from what we budgeted,” he adds.

Mitchell is also using his knowledge of his course’s clientele to his advantage to save money in the budget. For instance, the average age of members at Moss Creek is around 64. Because of the higher age, Wilkerson knows he can raise the cutting height on the greens without causing a stir among members. Raising the height means less stress on the turf, which can translate into less cost to maintain the greens.

Jim Husting, certified superintendent of Woodbridge Golf & Country Club in Woodbridge, Calif., is going through the budget blues, too. But Husting is getting by with a

little help from his friends, as in his club’s general manager and board members.

Like other superintendents, Husting’s budget was waxed by high fuel prices. He budgeted \$2.95 for a gallon of gas last September. The price hit \$4.40 earlier this summer. “With the rising price of petroleum — and everything seems to be made from petroleum in one way or another — everybody out here is raising their prices,” Husting says.

The many suppliers who make deliveries to Woodbridge, whether for golf maintenance or clubhouse operations, are adding fuel surcharges on the shipments. So Woodbridge’s board members decided to send a note to the club’s 600 members explaining that the increased costs were being passed on to them in the form of a \$30 surcharge.

“Nobody complained,” Husting says, noting the club raised \$18,000. “Everybody can see what’s going on.”

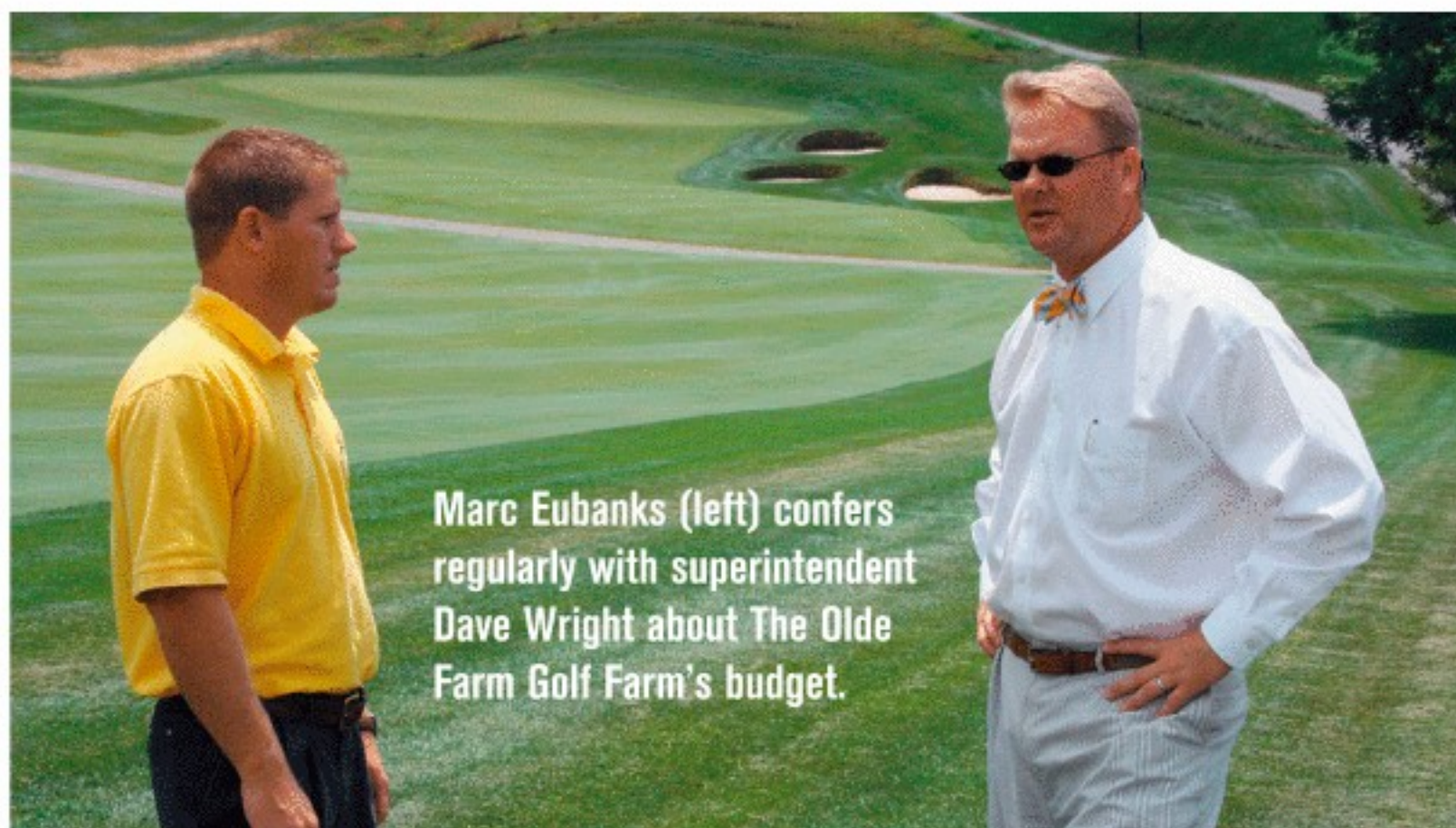
The members see the challenges that Husting has had to endure. A big reason for that is Husting communicates with them and his general manager to let know them the good, the bad and the ugly of any situation. In this particular situation, Husting told them that he would have to reduce mowing fairways and fertilize less if they wanted to stay within budget. But after hearing that, the members told Husting to conduct business as usual.

That’s not to say that Husting and the club aren’t watching what they spend. They are. All salaries have been frozen, and there have been layoffs, including one person on Husting’s staff.

Continued on page 26

“You just find a way to get more efficient at your job so you can offset these increasing operational costs.”

— MARC EUBANKS



Marc Eubanks (left) confers regularly with superintendent Dave Wright about The Olde Farm Golf Farm’s budget.



“The burden of working miracles should no longer be passed onto the superintendent.”

— DON SUTTON

Continued from page 25

But Husting's situation drives home the most important part of this equation: Talk to anybody on your staff who will listen about your budget woes.

“Communicate, communicate, communicate,” Husting says. “Just don't hunker down in your office and say there's no way you can get through this.” Tell it like it is to your owner, general manager, green committee, members and golfers and anybody else who needs to know. “Tell them, ‘This is what's going to happen if you're not going to give me any more money,’” Husting says.

“Keep on saying that you'll do the best you can with what you're given,” he continues. “But put the ball in their court.”

That's precisely what Eubanks has done at The Olde Farm. “I always try to throw the ball in the court of our owners, accountants or whomever the governing body is,” he says.

It's not his intention to dump the responsibility on anyone else, Eubanks says. It's simply to involve them in the budgetary process. It's vital for the general manager, the superintendent, the golf pro and others to strike an understanding between themselves about the budget, Eubanks stresses. And it's just as vital for the same people to solve any budget woes together. “The objective is to offset economic hardships by coming up with creative solutions together,” Eubanks asks.

If everyone is not on the same page, they need to make an effort to get there. Eubanks suggests that superintendents invite their general managers, owners or green chairmen “to come in the arena and see the fight.” By that,

he means the financial decision makers need to see the maintenance operation in action to understand the cost it takes to run it efficiently and successfully. When people are on the same page, they will have the same goal, he adds.

Sutton agrees with Eubanks' assessment. He also says superintendents must be trusted as budget prognosticators. When he was a superintendent, Sutton says he has had to fight for essential items in the budget for which he says he shouldn't have had to fight. And while Sutton believes general managers and others would learn and benefit from a day in the trenches with superintendents, he says he has found it difficult to get them to do so.

Eubanks, a former superintendent, understands Sutton's point but says superintendents must continue to press on to educate general managers, owners and others about the process. Eubanks suggests doing it in an engaging manner by seeking input and asking for advice.

Strong communication is especially key during difficult financial times because it's crucial to make the right business decisions, Eubanks stresses. That decision is probably not a knee-jerk decision by the general manager or superintendent to stop spraying fungicides. Such a decision might save money in the budget now, but it could lead to more severe problems, such as a wicked turf disease that wipes out half the greens. Of course, a lot more money than the cost of a fungicide application would be needed to fix that problem.

Another bad business decision would be to fire an experienced and well-liked superintendent just to dump his salary. Such a move could also come back to haunt the operation if that superintendent's agronomic know-how had been saving the operation money all along.

In the end, it's a matter of superintendents simply enduring the economic struggles. Husting offers some sound veteran advice on how to do so. “These are tough times,” he says. “But we've been through this before. You just have to tighten your bootstraps.”

Sutton agrees, but says golfers still need to tone down their great expectations for near-perfect conditions if the maintenance budget is out of whack. “The burden of working miracles should no longer be passed onto the superintendent,” he says. ■

Products you gotta have!

- Easy syringing of greens. Anytime. Anywhere. Optional electric rewind saves time, work.
- Easy Transport. Can be towed easily by any vehicle.
- No more hose dragging, scuffing, coiling, hanging. Save on maintenance.



@hiiks.com

The Reel Thing.
Save Time. Save Work.