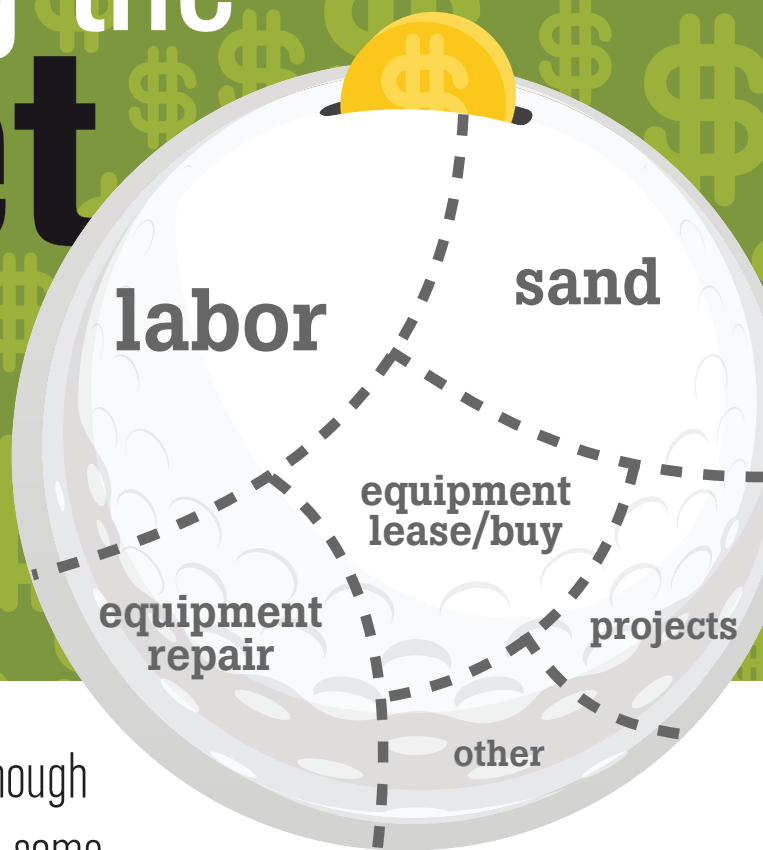


Balancing the Budget



Yeah, gas prices are down, but not enough to make a huge impact. But there are some things you can do to save some bucks

By Ron Furlong,
Contributing Editor

Seems like it was not long ago, with fuel prices up over \$4 a gallon, I was telling my oldest daughter about the time when I was a kid and gas prices were around a \$1 a gallon. She thought I was nuts.

To her it was one of those far-fetched stories parents tell their kids, like how they had to walk a mile through a blinding blizzard to get to the school bus. This walking-through-blizzards thing was actually true in my case, growing up in rural Wisconsin, but that's another story. I suppose now my daughter can tell her kids someday about the time when gas prices were close to a \$1 a gallon. Amazing how things can change in such a short period of time.

So how will these lower fuel prices (assuming they're still under \$3 by the time you read this) affect the way we approach the golf course maintenance budget? Can you count on them staying down? Do lower fuel prices offset the overall miserable state of the economy? Do they even help?

I guess the first thing to consider is how many other items do fuel prices affect in your budget. Obviously, they affect the fuel you use on the course for your equipment. Certainly, they affect fertilizers, chemicals (to some degree) and sand delivery (I suppose). Anything else? Maybe a few items, here and there, would be slightly altered, but enough to change your budget accordingly? Probably not.

The bottom line, as depressing as it may be, is I don't think you can significantly lower the cost of any of these secondary items

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Is this really the time to build those forward tees? Or to renovate that green that won't drain?

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— fertilizers, chemicals or sand — because of reduced fuel prices. None of these things are going to be reduced enough by lower oil prices to justify it.

So, what to do? Raise the white flag? Ask the government for a bailout for golf courses? Punt? Move to New Zealand? Well, before we all become Kiwis (not that *that* doesn't sound rather pleasant), here are a few suggestions to consider when sitting down at the laptop to hammer out the old budget. If we can't significantly lower fuel, fertilizers, chemicals or sand, maybe there are a few alternative line items that could be lowered a bit to ease the burden. Here are four I came up with that might help:

Labor

Nothing drains more away from the golf course maintenance budget than this line item. It comprises more than 50 percent of my budget each year. We have no choice

but to try to lower it. This, of course, could have a cascading effect on your entire operation if you do lower it. How to lower labor and not drop conditions and standards accordingly? Um, I don't actually have an answer for that question, but part of me thinks it sounds like a fun challenge. Did I say fun? I meant, interesting. Yeah, an interesting challenge.

Projects

This may or may not be a line item on your budget. It is on mine, and in years past a fairly significant one as well. This is definitely the time to ask yourself (and your board or owner): Is this really the time to build those forward tees? Or renovate that green that won't drain? Or take out those trees on that right dogleg that make golf balls disappear like the Bermuda Triangle did airplanes? ("Here's a Noodle, Jim. Are you playing a Noodle? No? Oh, just found a Top Flite. How 'bout a Top Flite? No?

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THIS MONTH'S HEALTH TIP



Exercise is a very important part of keeping your dog healthy. It keeps his muscles, heart, lungs and bones strong and healthy. It's also fun for your dog. Playing fetch, Frisbee, and hide and seek are some of the more popular exercise choices. Swimming can be a great way to exercise your dog and will keep him cool during hot summer days. But just be careful if you take your dog to the beach. Be sure to bring him some drinking water, as drinking sea water will make him very sick.

Goose. His owner is Bob Banner, former golf course superintendent of Amarillo Country Club in Amarillo, TX.
(Photo by: Jim Banner)



Improving the Way Professionals Care for Turf

Here's a Titleist? Yes, it's a Pro VI. Ah, let's see. No it's a 3, not a 4. Well, just drop one for gosh sake!") What do you think, maybe status quo on course improvements for a year or two? On the bright side, it means more balls to find for you and your staff.

Equipment repair

This item is another huge portion of my budget. Only labor and, in my case, sand have a higher dollar total. Having the right person as your equipment technician is by far the most essential tool in controlling this item. However, in addition to having a good mechanic, there are a few other factors to consider as well. The condition and age of your equipment are positively critical in the your ability to lower this line item. If your equipment is old and constantly breaking down, then this probably isn't the area you want to cut back. But if you have a relatively newer fleet and it's running well, this might be a spot to shave a few thousand dollars. A strong preventive maintenance program (as good as the one you probably have for chemical applications on your greens) needs to be in place, and if it is already in place then it needs to be fine-tuned. Don't sacrifice the future, but do be more on top of what is getting fixed and where each dollar is going. Have a purchase-order number system just for equipment repairs and know how much you spend on each piece of equipment throughout the year.

Leasing equipment

This makes up another big chunk of money in many budgets. Experience and a little bit of wisdom have told us in the past that it is better to lease equipment (in many cases) than to buy. This way you keep the equipment circulating and keep newer equipment coming in on a regular basis. Perhaps it is time to re-evaluate this practice. Although probably still sensible in certain areas (like greens mowers for instance), maybe the time has come to buy more equipment and try and get as much life out of it as you can.

And, finally

Lower fuel prices are not guaranteed. Keeping those oil-related line items like fuel, sand, fertilizers and chemicals up near past dollar levels is probably prudent. Having the ability to cut in a few other areas in these lean times may be the ticket to a budget that works for everyone. You might even have fun trying to make it all work. There I go again! I meant to say, you might enjoy the challenge of it all. Oh, what the heck. It might be fun. There, I said it. ■

Furlong is superintendent of Avalon Golf Club in Burlington, Wash.



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