

With an **AIM** to PLE

Despite tight maintenance budgets, superintendents continue to provide *players* the best conditions possible

An anxious Steve Hammon waits and wonders if the members of Traverse City (Mich.) Golf & Country Club will soon see the results of his maintenance budget cuts the past two years.

Hammon, the club's golf course superintendent, had to reduce his course's budget 7 percent in 2009 and another 9 percent this year because of this dilemma known as the Great Recession. Alas, things have changed as far as work getting done at Traverse City. Some tasks are getting done differently, and some aren't getting done at all. But if members have noticed anything, they're not saying.

"The core golf course maintenance work and conditions are still unchanged and the membership has not noticed anything different . . . yet," Hammon says.

Hammon, of course, is not alone in his anxiety. Any superintendent whose course maintenance budget has been cut probably feels the same way. That's because a reduced maintenance budget doesn't necessarily equate to an understanding golfer, who will still demand top conditions for his money spent.

About 65 percent of superintendents said they cut their maintenance budgets in 2009, the majority of them (41 percent) reducing their budgets between 5 percent and 10 percent, according to a *Golfdom* survey of nearly 600 superintendents. That said,

some superintendents are probably getting accustomed to working with less money, considering they're in the second and third years of budget cuts.

It's tough for Jim Loke, the certified golf course superintendent of Bent Creek Country Club in Lititz, Pa., to see his maintenance budget reduced. But while Loke is a stickler for providing tournament-like conditions daily, nobody has to explain to him why the reductions occurred.

"For the most part, we're accomplishing the visual effects of those standards," says Loke, who didn't reveal how much his budget has been reduced the past few years.

The 64-year-old Loke remembers tending turf back in the 1970s when preventive maintenance wasn't practiced much. "We waited until we saw the effects of disease, and then we sprayed," he says.

But preventive maintenance eventually became the norm for many golf maintenance

PHOTO BY: iSTOCK INTERNATIONAL INC.

BY LARRY AYLWARD,

ASE

operations. However, some courses have gone back to curative measures to save money during these tough financial times, including Bent Creek. And Loke's previous knowledge of spraying pesticides curatively has come back to help him.

"Experience plays a major role," says Loke, who has been in the business since 1969.

Rick Slattery, superintendent of Locust Hill Country Club in Pittsford, N.Y., has also reduced inputs and says he has saved plenty of money in the process. It's a tricky endeavor, though, considering Slattery's course hosts an annual LPGA event (this year's event in June was the LPGA Championship won by Cristie Kerr in June). But Slattery, who has been at Locust Hill for 16 years, is confident in his

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EDITOR IN CHIEF

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COMPETITION?



**The maintenance team
at Traverse City Golf
& Country Club is now
triplex mowing greens
daily instead of walk
mowing them Tuesday
through Saturday.**

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approach because he knows his course's playability so well.

"You can grow healthy turf with less inputs and still provide championship turf," he adds.

Slattery, whose course is located in a region where disease pressure can be high, didn't make his first fungicide application of the year until only a week before the LPGA Championship. He's also prudent with fertilizer use and only irrigates the course when he must.

"Even if you're not paying for your water, it still costs a lot of money for the electricity used to pump it," he says. "Here, it's about \$1,000 for every million gallons."

Slattery is big on scouting for pest outbreaks and spot spraying to control them. If two of his course's greens get dollar spot, he sprays the two greens, not all 18.

"I can't tell you how many times I've gone out and spot sprayed, especially on fairways," he says.

Pat Blum, superintendent of the nine-hole Colonial Acres Golf Course in Glenmont, N.Y., says he has cut back on maintenance costs ever since the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Pro-

gram certified his course in 1998 for its environmental stewardship. The process led to Blum reducing maintained turf, which led to less water and energy use, among other inputs.

While Blum's budget hasn't had any reductions in the past seven years, it also hasn't had any increases in that time. And even with no new money added annually, golfing quality has held up, he says.

At Traverse City, the maintenance team is now triplex mowing putting greens daily instead of walk mowing them Tuesday through Saturday. Triplex mowing has become popular at many golf courses because it takes less time, and it will be the standard at Traverse City for the rest of 2010.

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**Traverse City
superintendent
Steve Hammon
says the "core
conditions" at
his course are
unchanged.**

YES


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Paul Danielson, manager of financial marketing for The Toro Co., said it's not uncommon for courses to lease mowers, which they can turn over every four or five years, depending on the terms of the contract; or to purchase aerifiers and tractors, which are used less frequently and have a long life.

Rhonda Flannery, John Deere Credit's manager of product marketing development for golf and utility vehicles, said the one question superintendents need to ask to assess their existing equipment approach is whether they're meeting their replacement strategies.

For instance, if their plan is to have new fairway mowers every four years but they're not being turned over for five or six years, a change needs to be made. Instead of purchasing outright or a lease-to-own program,

There has been an increased interest in leasing, says John Deere Credit's Rhonda Flannery.

it might be better to lease the piece of equipment for the useful life defined by the golf course, and replace it every four years.

According to Flannery, the economy has produced a shift in the strategy some courses are following.

"We're seeing increased interest in leasing, and the primary reason for that is cash-flow driven," she said.

Troy Murray, vice president of sales and business development for golf equipment in Textron Financial's Captive Finance Group, said once the trend among courses was that most wanted to purchase equipment.

"In 2000, it moved toward leasing," Murray said. "It reached a plateau two or three years ago."

The split of leasing versus leasing to buy is about a 50-50 divide across the United States, with the average length of a lease at about 48 months. ■

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Incidentally, the mowing method hasn't slowed down greens at Traverse City, where they still run at 10 to 10.4 feet, thanks in part to daily rolling.

Like many private clubs, Locust Hill has lost members, and Slattery has had his maintenance budget cut as a result. In 2009, the budget was whacked 11 percent — from \$875,000 to \$760,000. But it was reduced only 4 percent this year. With an aim to keep golfers' expectations satisfied, Slattery says the key is to cut maintenance tasks that most golfers won't notice.

For instance, bunker maintenance has been reduced at Locust Hill but not to the point where golfers will complain about it. The maintenance crew no longer rakes bunkers fully, only where golfers have been. And if a golfer hasn't been in a bunker, it doesn't get raked.

"We haven't seen quality drop a lot," Slattery says.

Slattery has also coached his staff to

work as efficiently as possible. "If we can make it in-house, we'll make it," he says. "If we can fix it in-house, we'll fix it in-house."

Another key to appeasing golfers' expectations is to educate them about what's going on at the golf course, especially if it involves the maintenance budget. Hammon is doing that at Traverse City. When the club's finance committee and board of directors approved Hammon's 2010 budget in March, Hammon made a list of everything that would be affected by the cuts and communicated them to the course's green committee.

"My green committee appreciated knowing what to expect going into the season with our golf course conditions," Hammon says, noting that he also attended the April board of directors meeting and reported to them the same information so they were educated and prepared to answer members' questions if needed.

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To his credit, Hammon is getting out in front of the matter, which makes his waiting and wondering a little less stressful.

What about workers?

Joe Boe, superintendent of Windermere (Fla.) Golf Club, has had a busy year

rebuilding greens and greenside bunkers at his course, which closed for a renovation. That's all good, considering a lot of clubs have put renovations on hold because of the economy.

But Boe's club hasn't been immune to the tough financial times. He says his 2010 budget is holding up, but he has two fewer employees and his full-time

staff has gone from working 44 hours a week to 37 hours.

"We reduced hours to eliminate overtime, which cost a significant amount of money," Boe says. "My assistant, my foreman and I are doing more on-course work than we did in the past to make sure things get done as needed because of the labor shortfall."

Ninety-two percent of superintendents who cut their courses' maintenance budgets did so by reducing labor, either through layoffs or reduced hours, according to the *Golfdom* survey.

A buzz phrase in the modern-day working world is "doing more with less." Loke says the phrase applies to his crew.

"My staff is smaller, but productivity is significantly greater," he says. "We're getting a lot of work done."

At Traverse City, Hammon has implemented reduced hours, which he says has impacted the "second and third jobs" of the day.

"These tasks, including bunker edging, landscape bed mulch, trimming sprinkler heads and markers, spot-spraying weeds, pulling milkweed in natural areas, tree trimming and filling fairway divots have been reduced dramatically," Hammon says, noting that many of his crew members now leave the course at 11 a.m. instead of 2:30 p.m. each day.

Slaterry's maintenance staff is down to 19 people from 23. Slaterry took a

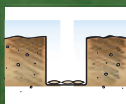


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Superintendent Jim Loke believes there are signs the economy is on the mend.

PHOTOS BY: CLAY DILLOW (TOP); COURTESY OF WINDERMERE GOLF CLUB

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— JOE BOE



7 percent pay cut last year. But even though he has reduced labor, Slattery didn't cut overtime pay from his budget because he says it provides a big incentive to his crew.

Slattery says he'd rather have 18 workers who are getting paid time-and-a-half for overtime than 22 workers who are working 40 hours a week with no overtime. Because the smaller staff is making more money with overtime, they're more motivated to work, says Slattery, who also reasons he can attract better employees by offering overtime.

"It's very important, because we don't pay workers a lot of money in this business, so the one thing we can do for them is give them overtime pay," Slattery says.

The golf economy

The general economy continues to sputter along with some improvement, but consumer confidence is still down and unemployment remains high.

The golf economy continues to sputter as well. Rounds are down 3 percent through May when com-

pared with last year, according to Golf Datatech.

While Boe believes Windermere's renovation will lead to a financially healthier club when it reopens, he's concerned about the general economy.

"I'm as pessimistic as I've ever been," says Boe, who worries about the chances of a double-dip recession when the Bush tax cuts expire in January.

But Loke believes the economy is on the mend. He sees anecdotal evidence — literally — that things are getting better.

Loke says he sees more delivery trucks on the road; he sees more people on the road going home from their jobs; and he sees more trestles being built in lumberyards for future houses.

"I think the economy is picking up steam," he says.

There are similar signs at Bent Creek, where 50 new members have joined the club in the past few months and there has been a considerable increase in revenue.

"We're feeling an electricity at our club that wasn't there a year ago," Loke says. ■

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