



ROLLING WITH THE ECONOMIC PUNCHE\$

The brutal but improving economy has been rough on many hard-working people in the golf course maintenance industry. So rough that some people are just happy to have a job, even if it means taking a pay cut.

From private and public golf facilities to large organizations such as the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America and various management companies, many operations aren't immune to reducing employees' wages. It's simply an occurrence that happens during difficult recessionary times.

Max Bowden, Tom Bolon and Fred Larned are examples of what many golf course superintendents are dealing with when it comes to salary reductions and furloughs. Here, the three share their stories.

Riding out the storm

Max Bowden is superintendent of the 18-hole Cramer Mountain Country Club in Cramerton, N.C., a private club owned by an elderly gentleman in his 70s who made his money in commercial real estate. The course, which opened in 1986, is part of a gated community in which the majority of residents are doctors and lawyers.

"We also had people in the banking industry, but we lost considerable membership when that went south," Bowden says, citing a decline from 400 members 10 years ago to about 230 now. "It's slowly gone down hill for years."

Some superintendents are absorbing hits financially because they're taking furloughs and salary cuts to keep their golf operations from sinking deeper into the red

BY JOHN WALSH, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR



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— MAX BOWDEN,
Cramer Mountain
Country Club

Cramer Mountain is up for sale. The owner offered the club to the members for purchase last November. They've made a couple of offers, which the owner has turned down.

Bowden says there's a good chance the club, which generated about 7,000 rounds last year, will sell. He also believes new owners could invest more money into the club. But even then, the new owners could also bring in their own people to manage the club, Bowden says.

"There's still uncertainty," he adds.

With that uncertain future in mind, Cramer Mountain employees took furloughs to lighten the club's economic

burden. Last fall, heading into the off-season, the kitchen staff took a furlough. Bowden and his crew are spreading out their furloughs, which started in the fourth quarter of 2009 and will continue through this winter. Bowden selected his two weeks around herbicide applications.

"The people that have been here the longest were able to pick the weeks they wanted first," Bowden explains of the furlough procedure. "We spread it out so there's not a total loss of manpower at one time.

"I'll come away OK. There are a few winter projects that we wanted to

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— TOM BOLON, Lake Forest Country Club

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do that won't get done, but the golf course conditions won't suffer too badly.”

Bowden wasn't surprised the furloughs were implemented.

“In fact, there were several days when I thought, ‘How can we still be open,’” he says, citing the perfect-weather days when the parking lot was empty. “I’m sure the owner is supplementing the operation out of his own pocket. It has been, ‘Do more with less and cut where you can.’”

Bowden's furlough equals a 4-percent pay cut.

“The sad part is it affects the attitude of you and the crew,” he says. “But [crew members] also realize they still have jobs. There aren't a lot of jobs out there. Some crew members are looking for other jobs and have found there isn't much out there. There's 15-percent unemployment in Gaston County (N.C.).”

Fortunately for Bowden, he's better off financially than his crew members, some of whom used to work in now-defunct textile mills and are used to this type of situation. “We knew this was coming in the late summer, so you had to plan ahead,” Bowden says. “I told the crew to plan ahead as well.”

Despite the grim situation, Bowden says it's not as bad as it could get.

“They could shut the doors, and we'd all be out of a job – that would be as bad as it gets,” he says.

Hit with a pay cut

Tom Bolon's situation is more stable than Bowden's, but it's not ideal. Bolon is the superintendent at the private, 18-hole Lake Forest Country Club in Hudson, Ohio. He has been there 11 years, the first two years as an assistant.

Bolon's maintenance budget of \$535,000 has been consistent for the past 10 years, but the budget has remained the same as expenses have increased. The staff (full-time and seasonal) has been reduced the past three years from 23 to 18.

“Lake Forest is the type of club to get 20 members and then lose 20 annually,” Bolon says, adding there are 150 equity members

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DESPITE THE FURLOUGH, FRED LARNED IS PROUD TO HAVE A JOB, CONSIDERING THE NATION'S 10-PERCENT UNEMPLOYMENT RATE.

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and 75 associate members. "During the past two years, there haven't been as many new full dues/equity paying members coming in. We're down 5 to 10 percent."

Bolon had been receiving a 4-percent annual pay increase for the past nine years. But when the executive committee reviewed the club's budget this past October, it was off substantially. To help recoup the deficit, all employees were asked to take a pay cut. Bolon and the club's two managers were asked to take a 10-percent pay cut for 2010.

"They needed to pull back the purse strings quickly," Bolon says. "They wanted to start immediately and continue into 2010. I told them I wouldn't take a 4-percent pay raise in 2010, and I suggested a two-week furlough without pay to meet them in the middle."

Bolon also hoped to get his contract, which ends December 2012, extended for another five years. Bolon, who's married with two kids and a wife who works, justifies his apprehensiveness about the pay cut.

"Our salary and health benefits are the only things we have," he says. "We have no 401k. That money is our savings. I've worked my way up to average compensation for this area, according to the GCSAA compensation study, so I'm trying to work out a compromise to such a large salary reduction."

Before the 10-percent managerial pay cuts, managers accepted all previous recommendations, including cutting 10 percent of all employees' hours.

"That would get them back to assessment numbers we had in 2007," Bolon

says. "Without these reductions, we're looking at more than double the 2007 assessment per member."

Partly prompting the pay cuts is Lake Forest's suffering business. Outings that once booked 120 to 140 players are now coming in at 70 and 80 players. Weddings and outside parties are scaling back, too.

"We're not getting the money per head we used to," Bolon says.

Still, Bolon says he expected the club, which will be debt free in April, was going to cut back after the golf season.

"The only place to save the kind of money needed is in labor," he says. "We could have done some cutting earlier in the year; however, that would have resulted in a reduction of course conditions. All year long my green chairman kept saying, 'Watch overtime, watch spending,' which is normal. I don't spend money just to spend it. I always pay attention to what's going on at the club. I was \$14,000 under budget for 2009 before the budget cuts going into 2010."

Lake Forest's fiscal year ends in February, but it should end in June because the club could write a more realistic budget then because it would know how many members have committed and how much business it has on the books for the year, Bolon says.

Bolon also saved the club about \$3,000 by not attending the Ohio Turfgrass Foundation's annual conference and show and the Golf Industry Show in San Diego. He was permitted to attend both events, according to his contract.

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Will you have to take a pay cut or furlough in 2010?

88%
NO
12%
YES



67%
NO

Will you receive a pay raise in 2010?

33%
YES



Golfdom Survey: Based on 575 responses

Economic Punches



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Still, Bolon has tried to keep communication open between Lake Forest's board and himself.

"I'll sell myself and explain why I'm hesitant about that size of a pay cut," he says. "I could be shooting myself in the foot."

Bolon has suggested revisiting the proposed salary cuts in May.

"There's no time table right now," he says. "It's status quo."

Open to a furlough, and thankful for a job

Fred Larned, superintendent at the nine-hole Sycamore Creek Golf Course in Fort Worth, Texas, works for the city of Fort Worth, which was \$59 million in debt in 2008. Sycamore is one of six courses owned by the city.

Because of the debt, the city manager suggested a furlough for all city workers this past

summer. It was approved by a majority vote three months later.

"Everybody voted for the furlough," Larned says. "I took eight furlough days in 2009, which equals about a 3-percent pay cut."

In addition to the furlough, the city, which started a new fiscal year Oct. 1, eliminated citywide mowing, several youth activities and its graffiti abatement program. It also sold two libraries and closed the city pool.

"The city manager is trying to sell any unused buildings that are city owned," Larned says. "The city pretty much knocked out the debt."

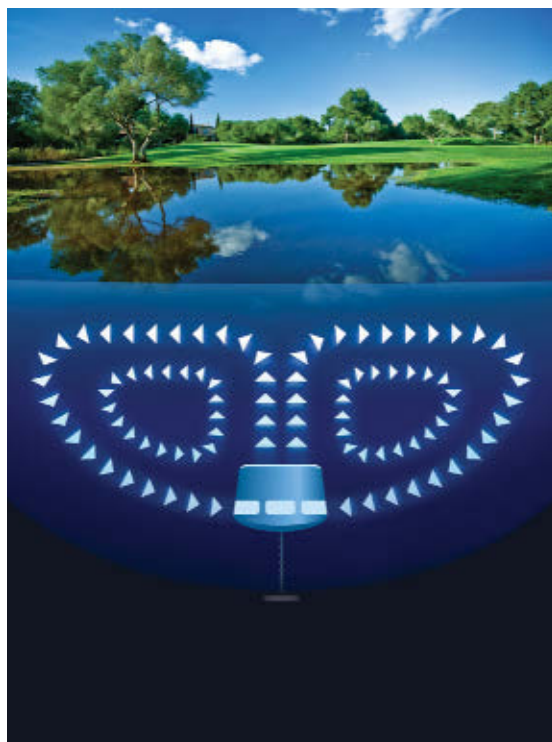
To put things into perspective, Larned says the city of Fort Worth hasn't raised taxes in about 10 years.

Despite the furlough, Larned is proud to have a job, considering the nation's unemployment rate of 10 percent.

"I was willing to take the eight days of furlough and still have a job," he says. "I

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Economic Punches

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personally would prefer to take the eight days than see a cut in the maintenance budget. Eight days equals about one paycheck. I can find work for those eight days.”

Larned, who has been improving course conditions since he arrived, scheduled his eight days at a differ-

ent time than most city workers, who took time off around the holidays. The city’s golf courses were busy around that time.

“We’re self sufficient,” says Larned, who has a two-man crew and maintains the executive par-3 course with a budget of \$268,000, which increased \$11,000 last year. “We were losing \$120,000 a



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— FRED LARNED,
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year before I got here. We lost \$76,000 last year (ending September 2009).”

They're not alone

Clearly, Bowden, Bolon and Larned aren't the only superintendents dealing with pay cuts.

“I put a thread on the GCSAA Web site about salary reductions, and it got a ton of responses,” Bolon says. “People have been asked to do the same thing, or it has been handed to them.”

These troubling economic times have been difficult, especially for superintendents in their late 40s and early 50s.

“Many superintendents my age have been let go because clubs can't afford their salaries,” Bowden says. “Then they just move up assistants [to take their spots].”

With all the talk about furloughs and salary reductions, the situation could be worse — superintendents could be losing their jobs.

“It's one of those things ... the way the economy is,” Larned said about pay cuts. “I'm happy to have a job.”

Bowden, who has been a superintendent since 1982, has never seen an economic situation like this.

“But we're not the only ones in this boat,” he says. “Others are doing the same thing.” ■

Walsh, a contributing editor to Golfdom, is based in Cleveland.