

There is no simple answer to the question of employment security in the golf course superintendent ranks. The golf industry is hard to study in broad terms. It's diverse. There are high-end private clubs, resorts, semi-private clubs, municipal courses and mom-and-pop 9-holers at RV parks.

Each sector has its own set of circumstances, which can determine the fate of the superintendent's position. It doesn't help that we are mired in a sluggish economy, and discretionary spending and course revenues vary by region.

I see a couple of "trends" emerging on both sides of the employment issue. They are not new, but they are perhaps accelerated, due to the nickel-and-dime hypersensitivity and ensuing pressures on job satisfaction. It seems that the practice of firing the older, experienced superintendent for no other reason than to reduce payroll costs is on an uptick.

Responsible for some of that increase is a recent surge in "boutique" and even established golf management companies taking over golf courses. Some courses might be struggling, and in some cases the owners or members just don't want to deal with it anymore. In other situations, it is the direction that boards of directors of private clubs take, where the course maintenance line item is always a favorite target.

Recently, one club I know of fired the superintendent and promoted the assistant. It then changed his title to "Supervisor of Maintenance." They are squeezing dollars till the eagles scream. Good luck with that. An already small, efficient crew is taking care of the golf course, clubhouse grounds and condo common areas. Crew morale must be great.

Cuts to maintenance budgets eliminate "perks" like superintendent dues, education, meetings and travel, and slash essentials such as labor, equipment, chemicals and fertilizers. Yet clubs still demand excellent conditions. This was reaffirmed by a recent survey conducted by this magazine, where numerous readers told us that despite the cuts to the maintenance budget, there have been no cuts to expectations.

It's no surprise that I'm hearing more and

Job Insecurity for Superintendents

BY JOEL JACKSON



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more older superintendents talking about burnout and stress. In some cases, superintendents are choosing to get out of the profession they once loved. Some stay in related fields such as commercial sales or landscape services, but others are making complete breaks to follow new paths.

There always is the personality conflict factor that can cause many a superintendent to lose his or her job. This condition cuts across all golf course sectors. If someone has a beef with the superintendent, whether it's the club's general manager or an outspoken member, the outcome usually will not favor the superintendent. Most of the time we don't know all the facts in these cases, but we tend to give our brothers and sisters the benefit of the doubt.

The club should sit down with the superintendent. And together they should work out a maintenance plan that reflects reality — that course conditions today are the result of fewer workers and less club spending. If that conversation were to happen, then the need to lay off a knowledgeable, experienced veteran superintendent would be averted many times over. It may be hard to put a dollar value on knowledge and experience, but it does ultimately affect the bottom line.

Unfortunately, a superintendent's job security is haphazard in this day and age. It hangs on changing relationships with club leaders or members. While there is no guarantee out there, superintendents who are professional, who communicate clearly, who network and who know technology will have the best chance of surviving. And a word to clubs: It's not just business; it is personal!

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