



The Art of doing it cheap

BY CHRIS SORRELL

Without a doubt the golf course superintendent profession is demanding. In the best of situations a superintendent is forced to deal with things that are not within his control. Most notably there is Mother Nature... and the economy.

Most every golf course superintendent has felt the uncomfortable sensation of a tightening fiscal belt over the past few years. As the golf market stagnated and revenues decreased, what was available for course maintenance diminished. Superintendents had to closely reevaluate what practices they were committed to and what could be removed from their regime.

Without a doubt this was a difficulty for many superintendents . . . but not all. There are some who have struggled and fussed with a restrictive budget on a regular basis; each year looking at meager budgets, trying to determine how best to create something from next to nothing. The weak golf market has not impacted them as much as others because it is the same as before: doing the most with the little they have.

These superintendents manage courses with good conditions on budgets that are only a fraction of what is commonly considered the "low end." I speak from experience in this regard. My first superintendent posting, in 2007, was on a small course in north central Pennsylvania. During my 5-year tenure, I never had an annual budget greater than \$117,000.

This may seem extreme to many in the industry, but it is what there was to work

with and every effort was made to produce something outstanding. Though my greens may not have been the fastest, the rough might have gotten a little taller at times and the course might have suffered a bit more with the extremes of summer, the course still maintained a favorable comparison to others with substantially greater resources.

Taking our time

Of primary importance in trying to be frugal (aka, just plain cheap) is to understand the relationship between time and money.

The fact is that these sorts of courses have a lot more time than money, so maximizing the advantage time allows is only wise. As an example, when I took over my first course, there was a significant thatch layer present on the greens. As any formally trained superintendent would, my first impulse was to aerate the heck out of them. Unfortunately this approach was not permissible with our budget, so it was necessary to settle for a single aeration per year. In addition, frequent light verticutting during the season, light topdressing and an aggressive annual verticutting were employed.

Although the aggressive core aeration approach would have produced more immediate results, the availability of time was capitalized on and resulted in improved greens condition over time. Important to this approach is an understanding of what is expected by the clientele. Upon arriving at the course, I won great favor merely by mowing the greens on a daily basis. The member-

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There are low-budget golf courses and there are no-budget golf courses. A superintendent veteran of both types tells how he still got it all done.

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ship did not have high expectations for the course after seeing it disregarded for so many years. Realizing this, it was easy to recognize that slow and steady improvement would be appreciated. Although personally, this pace didn't always sit well, it taught me that meeting the patron's expectations was more important than meeting mine. The consequent monetary savings made the limited budget easier to manage.

Labor on a budget

Naturally, the single largest portion of a budget is labor expenses. To keep these expenses under control, the course would only employ a very small annual labor force. The crew was composed of three senior crew members (primarily adult laborers) and three high school crew members.

This design allowed the course to maintain a minimal exposure to labor overhead such as unemployment expenditures. Further, the crew was "phased" in and out during the season. The first employee would begin around the first of April, followed by the second employee around the first of May and the third employee in the middle of May. The three high school workers started after school ended around the first of June. This system resulted in a slow increase in labor costs during a time when revenues are only starting to trickle in.

The high school labor would end when school began, while the rest of the labor was released by the end of October.

Shopping around

When it came to chemicals and fertilizers, it was absolutely essential that the course got the most bang for each buck spent. To achieve this I took the unusual approach of "shopping" all the products needed each upcoming year.

This required taking stock during the late fall to determine what amount of individual products remained, and, by using past fertilizer/pesticide records, determining how much of each product would be needed the coming year. This developed into a "vendors need sheet" which was sent out to anyone who wanted to sell



me a product. The result was the ability to mix and match between dealers to get the best deal on price, terms and quantity discounts.

Although somewhat time consuming, the tactic maximized my control over the annual chemical and fertilizer dollar. Being blessed with a few vendors who would tolerate this unorthodox approach, it provided me with a very successful management tool.

Additionally, the use of chemicals and fertilizers were minimized by employing the advantages the course offered while maximizing cultural controls and a scouting program. The course was located on top of a mountain and as a result, the wind regularly blew. The resultant decrease in the duration of turf wetness suppressed disease.

I maintained a fertilization regiment that was highly organic. All greens, tees, collars and approaches received only natural organic granular fertilizers (unless they required extra fertilization due to a particular issue). This was supplemented using foliar feeding products, but only to a small extent. The use of natural organic fertilizers aided in disease suppression and the reduction of chemical applications. This was all monitored by a scouting program that informed the curative use of pesticides.

Planning ahead

The final tool I used to make ends meet on this minimally budgeted course, was an expenditure calendar. Each year before the annual budget meeting I created an expenditure calendar which projected all the course's maintenance expenditures on a monthly basis. This tool was of significant importance for the owners so they could know how much money would be required each month to continue normal maintenance operations. This was particularly important when maintenance began in the spring during the time revenues were still low. Using this calendar allowed all the tools, parts and various other necessities to be spread out over a number of months and purchased at the latest date before they would be needed.

This is how I did it in the leanest of situations. Sometimes it is not pretty, other times it is not exactly what we want. Without a doubt it can be tedious and difficult, but it will work. With artful approach and diligent effort, cheap can be achieved! ©

Chris Sorrell is the superintendent at Silverhorn GC in Edmond, Okla. This is his second story for *Golfdom*. We're happy to report that his maintenance budget has increased since the last time he wrote for us.

