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To Rent or to Buy?

That's a *good* question.

Deciding which option is best
for your equipment needs
during in-house renovations
poses tough questions

By Frank H. Andorka Jr., Managing Editor

Bill Spence has handled obtaining equipment for renovations two ways and found success in both. When Spence first arrived at The Country Club at Brookline (Mass.) as superintendent in 1985, he found himself preparing for that year's U.S. Open. As he scanned his maintenance shed, he quickly realized he didn't have the equipment to do extensive renovations himself. So Spence contracted the work to outside firms who provided their own equipment, saving his club the expense of purchasing items like backhoes and irrigation trenchers.

If superintendents can use one piece of equipment for multiple tasks, then it's probably a better bargain to buy it.





(Above) Renting from a local supplier probably makes more sense on larger projects that require one-time-use equipment.

(Below) Today's more nimble equipment is easier to use without intensive training.

"I wasn't sure what we were capable of doing then, so we relied on outside contractors to do most of the work," Spence says. "It turned out to be a good decision. The more comfortable I got in my job, the more projects we started to do in-house."

Over the next 14 years, Spence purchased a formidable arsenal of construction equipment because he decided doing more jobs in-house would save the club money over time. When Spence hosted another major tournament — the 1999 Ryder Cup — most of the remodeling work was done in-house. Spence says proudly that he and his crew did most of those renovations themselves. Spence and his crew learned vital lessons about construction in 1985. "The experience made doing it ourselves much easier the next time — and owning the equipment helped, of course," he adds.

In an era of tighter budgets, more courses ask superintendents to do small-scale renovation and remodeling work themselves. Unless you work at a club where money is no object, however, the question of whether to buy or rent the equipment is always tough. Experts say the answer hinges on whether the equipment is

flexible enough to be used in several applications, and if you employ workers who can use the equipment properly.

Multi-use machines

The first step to any successful in-house renovation is to determine the size of the project, says Jan Beljan, an architect with Jupiter, Fla.-based Fazio Golf Course Designers.

"Research the job beforehand, and get an architect to advise you on what needs to be done," Beljan says. "There's a science that goes into any remodeling job, and it pays to at least consult with someone who's done it before prior to doing a job yourself."

Only after you've determined the size of the

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF BILL SPENCE, CRAIG CURRIER AND THE TORO CO.


A close-up photograph of a light-colored, segmented insect larva, possibly a fly or beetle larva, resting on a dark, textured surface. The larva is oriented vertically, with its head at the top. It has a segmented body with several pairs of legs and fine hairs. The text is overlaid on the middle of the larva's body.

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In-House Renovations Carry Inherent Risks

When a general manager, owner or green committee chairperson asks you to do an in-house course renovation, it's easy to say, "Yes," especially on the theory that such accommodation may help you down the road with one of *your* pet projects. But you should consider the potential pitfalls before you agree to put yourself on the line.

Jan Beljan, an architect with Jupiter, Fla.-based Fazio Golf Course Designers, says superintendents must make honest assessments about whether they can do the best remodeling jobs.

"You can always tell when extra tees were constructed by superintendents with little experience," Beljan says. "They're the ones that look squished or are in awkward positions that destroy the architect's vision for the hole. It doesn't look natural."

Then there's the pesky question of insurance liability if something goes wrong. Michael Hurdzan, principal of the Columbus, Ohio-based design firm Hurdzan-Fry, says superintendents who do in-house renovation projects should understand the legal liability attached to the work.

"If you reconstruct a tee and someone gets injured because you didn't use the proper construction techniques, they can hold you and the club liable," Hurdzan says. "Superintendents are hanging themselves out to dry."



The maintenance crews do most of the renovation work in-house at Bethpage State Park's Black Course, in Farmingdale, N.Y., site of this month's U.S. Open.

Hurdzan, whose firm routinely spends \$75,000 per year in liability insurance, says that before starting any remodeling, superintendents should demand written letters from their bosses absolving them from liability should something go wrong. After all, most superintendents didn't train to be architects, so they shouldn't shoulder the same responsibilities.

"It's easy to say internal work saves the club money, but if someone sues the club after improper work has been done, it will cost the club more in the long run," Hurdzan says. "I'd urge all clubs not to put their superintendents in a position to fail."

— Frank H. Andorka Jr., Managing Editor

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project can you decide what equipment you'll need, Beljan says. Larry Ruiz, superintendent at Oasis CC in Palm Desert, Calif., says he's rented and purchased equipment, but he has combined the two methods on bigger jobs.

When the club asked Ruiz to create trenches between two lakes to ease the movement of water between them, he purchased a trencher because he knew he'd use it later to install irrigation pipe and electrical wires for his irrigation system. On the other hand, he rented a backhoe to deepen the lakes because he didn't foresee using it for other jobs.

"All things being equal, buying is better than renting because you have something to show for your money," Ruiz says. "When you need a big piece of equipment that you're only going to use on one job, however, you're probably better off renting."

Marc Bowers, marketing manager for Site-work Systems, a division of Bloomington, Minn.-based Toro that makes small construction equipment, says he sees a trend toward renting.

"If you're going to use a piece of equipment 55 percent of the time, you're better off purchasing it," Bowers says. "If you're using it less than that, renting is the way to go."

Bowers says more superintendents who start by renting small equipment like the Dingo, a multifaceted piece of equipment that can be used as an earthmover, trencher, bucket loader and earth drill, which end up buying it because they see how versatile it is. Equipment is also more user-friendly than it was 10 to 20 years ago.

"In the past, you had to decide whether you could spend a half-day training your worker on a new piece of equipment," Bowers says. "Today, most equipment is so easy to use, it's not as much of an issue."

Buying your own equipment, however, does have advantages. Brad Lemke, manager of new product development for Grand Rapids, Minn.-based ASV, which makes small construction vehicles for the golf industry, says purchasing equipment gives superintendents control over how the equipment is used.

"Sometimes contractors will bring their equipment to your course and do serious damage," Lemke says. "Then you're stuck with the bill for the cleanup. If you own your own equipment, you will be more careful

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For the 1985 U.S. Open, The Country Club at Brookline (Mass.) outsourced its renovations. For the 1999 Ryder Cup, the club did most of the work in-house.

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than outside contractors about limiting problems.”

Still, renting equipment is a good idea when you want to avoid long commitments. Robby Acosta, superintendent of the Country Club of Sapphire Valley (N.C.), says he's done several projects over the last three years, from laying irrigation lines to rebuilding tees and greens. Acosta says he's used an enormous amount of equipment, which he primarily rents.

“We're not talking about projects that I'm going to have to do over and over again if I do them right,” Acosta says. “When you're working on those kinds of jobs, it makes sense to rent the equipment from a local dealer.”

There are exceptions to Acosta's rental policy, however. He bought his own stump grinder, for example, because his crew often clears troublesome trees from the course. It would cost him more to hire a tree company to come out and remove the stump, so he can justify the expense to his members. “If the piece of equipment I'm using has more than one application, I'm far more likely to buy it than rent it,” Acosta says.

Good Relationships Can Help Save Money

Bill Spence, superintendent of The Country Club at Brookline (Mass.), takes great pride in his renovation work. He and his crew members did the majority of the remodeling work necessary for the 1999 Ryder Cup.

But he acknowledges he couldn't have done it without the help of local contractors with whom he'd built strong relationships during his 14 years at the course.

“When I've used contractors in the past, we've always tried to deal with them fairly,” Spence says. “As a result, if we need a specialized piece of equipment for a short time, I can usually pick up the phone and call them. They'll drop it off for us to use and pick it up after we're done. It has worked out well.”

When Spence prepared for the Ryder Cup, he also experienced a crush of phone calls from distributors hoping to loan him equipment to use on the high-profile project.

“When you host a major tournament, everyone wants to get their products on your course, even if it's only temporary,” Spence says. “You suddenly have more friends than you can imagine.”

— F.H.A. Jr.

Employee empowerment

It's one thing for an employee to run a greens mower he's run every day for six months. It's quite another to ask the same employee to climb aboard a backhoe during a greens renovation and expect him to work with precision. After all, it takes time to become an expert on any new piece of equipment.

Dick Gray, superintendent at the Jupiter Hills Club in Jupiter, Fla., says he learned how to operate most construction equipment under the watchful eye of P.B. Dye in 1986 while

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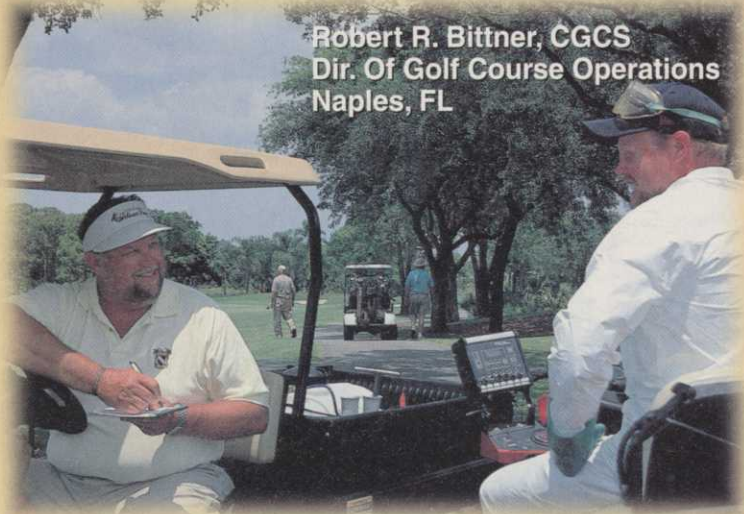
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To Buy or to Rent?

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working with the architect on several projects. As a result, he feels comfortable doing most renovation work in-house. There are some pieces of equipment, however, he'd still leave to the experts.

"When we rent a track-hoe, we'll subcontract for an operator," Gray says. "You have to learn your limitations. If you try to do something you're not capable of doing, you can end up in a lot of trouble."

Hire specialized equipment operators if it will save time on a job.

Gray says he also occasionally hires specialized operators for equipment if it will save time on a job.

"An experienced operator may be able to do a job in three hours what it would take me six to do," Gray says. "If that's the case, it makes sense to hire someone who can do it."

Craig Currier, superintendent at of all Bethpage State Park's golf courses in Farmingdale, N.Y. (including the Black Course, the site for this month's U.S. Open), says he trains crew members on two dumps near the course to practice operating any new machinery.

"It's hard to teach someone how to operate equipment without actually sitting on the machine and using it," Currier says. "You need to train your crew members at an out-of-the-way place. It usually only takes a few hours before they're comfortable using most machines."

Currier says he's saved New York state \$1 million the past four years by doing in-house renovations on many of his 90 holes. Having the right equipment helped him do the job.

"Whether you rent or buy, it's more satisfying to do the job in-house than to farm it out," Currier says. "I know my crew and I take great pride in the projects we've done, and we're reminded of our work every day when we care for the course." ■