



THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF GOING PRIVATE

By Pat Norton

No doubt we've all heard the expression "how quickly things change".

No doubt that the saying "the only constant is change" is also familiar.

No doubt.

Anyone who knows me (or my employment history) knows that I'm not afraid of change. Change, at the very least, keeps things interesting. Cedar Creek is currently undergoing a very fundamental transformation, or change. Over the winter the 120 members of this club had a chance to complete a comprehensive questionnaire concerning their satisfaction with club operations and facilities.

As you might guess, many people took this chance to vent some frustrations and offer constructive criticism. Most respondents were reasonable in their comments, while others were totally off the wall in both their complaints and their suggestions.

Basically, nobody wins in a club situation where there is a mix of public golf and members. The public generally is very understanding and appreciative of the facility. Members, on the other hand, are a little more critical, expecting more access to the golf course than can really be justified. They do, however, seem to respect the golf course more and definitely do their part in repairing it as they play.

As a result of the questionnaires and for a combinations of other reasons, the owners of this club complex have decided to change the format from public daily fee/limited members to privately owned, private golf membership only with outings limited to two days per week. Sounds complicated to the locals, but very familiar to me after working at Cherokee Country Club for a couple of years.

This format seems to fly in the face of every recommendation ever made for

operating a golf course as a profit center. Or does it?

Do all the pluses and minuses involved with a public course balance out favorably when compared to a private club setup?

Does the prospect of owners and staff praying for constantly ideal golfing weather, enabling revenue maximization, leave a question in one's mind?

Does the specter of constantly being money tight in the winter, with relatively little membership income to rely on, leave a bad taste?

Does a golf course superintendent relish the thought of "Joe Golfer" bashing and pounding those poor tees half to death, driving golf cars within inches of huge oak trees, or narrowly missing Aunt Emma with a low line drive tee shot?

Of course not.

Golf investors can usually recoup their investment more quickly from public operations. But it can be pretty uncertain as to Wisconsin weather—early November blizzards and heavy thunderstorms in the spring can make a short golf season even shorter.

Figuring out the arithmetic, going to a private club arrangement makes some sense. If ample members can be attracted who are willing to pay the price, it is a win-win situation. Owners/investors know in advance how much revenue will be available. Budgeting takes on a little more meaning while paying the bills should be less traumatic for the bookkeeper.

The superintendent comes out a winner also, for reasons familiar to us all. The members' desire for quality runs a little deeper, which dovetails nicely with the dreams and ambitions of superintendents everywhere. Ideas formerly out of reach may yet become reality. Wear and tear on the golf course is

certainly lessened so that turf has a chance to recover.

Thank God, it's about time!

I am a little uneasy about it all, though. Anybody who is identified with Cedar Creek, even the kitchen staff, get bombarded with the question of "why?"

"Why is Cedar Creek going private," they ask. "Why is access to this lovely facility being denied to us, the golfing public?"

People are genuinely hurt and upset to think that it will be a rare opportunity to be able to play here in the future.

The City of Onalaska even got into the act, portraying themselves as being betrayed by Cedar Creek after promises were supposedly made to always have this golf course available to the golfing public. In return for those assurances, the city allegedly did backflips and cartwheels when cooperation was asked of them by us during construction.

In a way, I do feel some regret about the club going private, although I had no impact on the decision. The public should always have access to quality golfing facilities. On the other hand, people who have been involved with any golf development project know all about the bottom line.

These facilities were built through private investment, not through any sort of public funding. The only true obligation that these owners have is to themselves and to the lending institutions. At some point, this place has got to begin paying for itself. If it is deemed that going private gives us the best chance for long term success, then I am all in favor.

Going private could easily mean some short term cash flow problems until enough members join the club. But in the long run it could have many benefits.

At least for some of us.