

# Budget Blues

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The 37th Annual Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium concluded a few weeks ago and those in attendance would have had to been asleep not to take home a few novel ideas regarding ways to stretch an operating budget. It was no surprise to find that most of superintendents polled during the meeting have had their budgets frozen or reduced for 2003.

Most of the operating budget is spent on wages and benefits, consequently hiring fewer employees is often the first response to budget cuts. This means non-essential areas of the course will receive less attention. Based on the comments from attendees made during the panel discussion, some of the changes that will occur due to severely limited resources include:

- Roughs and fairways will be mowed less frequently.
- Every hole location may not be changed each day, based on the amount of play the previous day.
- Bunkers may be raked only once or twice per week, and only touched up during the weekend.
- Greens may be maintained with riding units more often and mowing may only be done six days per week.
- The practice of allowing early bird players access to the course will be curtailed, especially the single or double golfers who like to be first off on the tee at first light and play in under three hours. They inevitably catch up with the maintenance crew, which reduces the efficiency of mowing operations.

- Overtime will be eliminated, which means some valuable long-term employees that depend on overtime will seek other employment. No overtime means many in-house renovation projects will need to be delegated to contractors.
- One course decided to slash green fees to attract more play, while at the same time explaining to the golfers that the reduced fee will be at the expense of far less grooming of the course.

Excessive bunker maintenance, due to golfers' spiraling expectation was a concern mentioned in several presentations. In the ideal world, golfers would do their fair share and play a responsible round - replace divots, fix ball marks, and rake the hazard after a shot. In this world the sand in bunkers would only have to be touched up from time to time unless a severe washout occurred after heavy rainfall, though soil-contaminated sand may require frequent tillage. Customary golf course etiquette shouldn't be too much to ask, but far too often, it is.

Unfortunately, as much or more time is spent grooming bunkers

than grooming greens at an increasing number of courses. All the complaints over *inconsistent* bunker conditions heard during many TAS visits this season reinforces the fact that golfers have simply forgotten that bunkers are hazards - hazards that need to be avoided or there will be a significant penalty to pay. An inordinate amount of time is being spent to provide *consistent* conditions in hazards, but the complaints never end because what constitutes ideal conditions to one golfer may be considered unacceptable to another. Consistency is definitely in the eye of the beholder.

Not all is doom and gloom. The observation was made that budget cuts can be considered an opportunity for some superintendents to step up to the plate and prove their value to an owner, course official, etc. By making an extra effort to document and then communicate the changes that need to be made to the course maintenance program during tough economic times, the smart manager will convince everyone that he or she is truly an invaluable employee. ♣



**Bob Vavrek, Bruce Williams and Mike Hurdzan were among the distinguished roster of speakers at the 2002 Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium.**