

Supporting the MTGF

...is it in our best interest?

By FRED TAYLOR
President, MGCSA

There is little question that the emergence of the Minnesota Turf & Grounds Foundation as a benefactor of thousands of dollars in revenue from their annual conference has raised more than a few eyebrows among the membership of the MGCSA. Questions such as "What are they going to do with the money? . . . Why doesn't the MGCSA get that money? and why are we supporting the entire industry?" have been circulating throughout our organization. It is important that this issue be brought out in the open and discussed. To this end, I would like to give my impression of the MTGF, its benefits to members of the MGCSA and the cost to our members.

First of all, we must remember that the MTGF is a foundation, not an association. It does not collect dues from members — you are a member of the MTGF automatically by being a member of an association that is affiliated with the MTGF. Every attempt is made to encourage new individuals or firms to join an allied association first. AS a foundation, the MTGF was created to support and promote the turf and grounds industry, of which, golf courses are a part.

The way in which the MTGF supports our industry is obvious in some cases, and a little vague in others. The most obvious contributions are the educational opportunities offered at the annual conference. Think back a few years when the MGCSA conference was held at the Northland Inn. If you compare that trade show to the current MTGF trade show, you must agree that the current show is by far and away more educational and valuable to attendees. As far as the educational sessions are concerned, the current format allows for more choices of topics and a greater number of

nationally recognized "headline speakers." The cost to attend this conference is about the same as it was at the Northland. What this boils down to is a better conference for the same fee. To me, that is a good deal for everyone in our association. The attendance statistics confirm this position, as 567 people from the golf course industry registered for the 1996 conference as compared to the roughly 350 or so that attended at the Northland in 1992. This represents a 60% increase in participation. A better value does attract more people.

There are other ways that the MTGF has been of help to our industry and our association. Some of these are difficult to quantify, much like Jimmy the Greek's "intangibles" which he used to help handicap football games. One of the intangibles is the opportunity to meet and interact with green industry people that are not from the golf course. I personally have met some really great people from the parks, sports turf, cemetery and school supervisors associations, not to mention a new group of non-turf vendors that can help me with my non-turf supplies and equipment. If networking is the buzzword of the future, then having the folks from the other allied associations around to communicate with is a good deal for us.

Another intangible that has come from being involved with the MTGF, is improved relations with the University of Minnesota. It is no secret that the MGCSA and the U of M have had a somewhat tenuous and at times strained relationship over the past ten or fifteen years. I can't put my finger on why this started, but I believe that mending the fences is *always* better than tearing them down. In our turf

community, it seems to me that the industry should support the University, and the University should in return support the industry. It works in the fields of medicine, business and agriculture; why can't it work in turf and grounds? Through the efforts of many people in the MTGF, the bridge between the University and MGCSA is getting easier to cross. Ultimately, there will be a strong and unified relationship between the two.

Related to the University, the emergence of the Empire Township project as a potential educational and research facility for turf and grounds is a huge bonanza for our industry. If built as planned, this will be the greatest asset to the Minnesota golf turf community that has ever existed. There are many, many possibilities associated with this research center, and there is no group of people that would benefit more from such a project than golf course superintendents. It is unlikely that the University would provide the land for the project without the support of a unified turf and grounds industry. Admittedly, it's not a sure bet, but from a cost/benefit standpoint to the membership of the MGCSA, it's no-cost, huge-return potential is a "no-brainer."

Another benefit derived through the MTGF is the ability for the Foundation to elevate the knowledge and understanding of individuals that have, in the past, not had any educational opportunities offered to them. Obviously, this has no direct impact on members of the MGCSA; we have had the luxury of greater education for years. But indirectly, helping others by making turf and grounds education available, will support professionalism throughout the entire industry. Again,

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the value of helping the people from other turf and grounds areas is difficult, if not impossible to calculate. The hope though, is that we will all have a better world to live in because of it.

The Cost To Our Members

The cost of the MGCSA's support for the MTGF is limited to the lost revenue from the annual conference. In the years prior to the MTGF's participation, the conference was usually budgeted to break even. In reality however, it garnered a profit for our association. The funds were either put into the scholarship fund or put into the general fund, where they were usually banked because they were not budgeted for. Our last year at the Northland garnered about \$8,000.00 profit for our association. At the time, this amount of "extra money" was considered a huge bonus for our bottom line.

Since the development of the MTGF however, there has been an emphasis put on increasing the size, scope and profitability of the conference. Through economies of scale, the operating cost per attendee has been reduced, resulting in increased profit margins. Simply put, the more people, the more money that can be made. In addition, the cost for vendor booths has increased. From their point of view, the vendors are able to gain more exposure to their products with the increased attendance. For this increased exposure they are willing to pay more per booth. In my opinion, the vendors who participate in the MTGF are the big contributors to the funds that are so controversial.

The argument that the MGCSA is solely responsible for half of any profits from the conference is clouded by the fact that if there weren't other participants in the conference, there wouldn't be the level of vendor support or the economies of scale that lead to the profits. We would probably be making \$8,000.00 and be happy about it. Unfortunately, we would have half

the education, and half the trade show, also. Most importantly, attendance has increased each year. Speakers associated with similar foundations from other states are overwhelmed by the growth in both the size and quality of our conference and show. Total headcount for this year was almost 1,500.

Where Is The Money Going?

The 1996 version of the conference netted about \$56,000.00. The board of directors has allocated these funds as follows:

\$13,000 for research, education and outreach;

\$4,000 for scholarships;

\$25,000 for 1997 conference seed money;

\$10,000 for administration, and

\$10,000 for future use and contingency.

MGCSA's representative on the foundation board, Pat Walton, has been appointed to head the Research and Scholarship Committee of the MTGF. It is a good bet that some of these funds will be used to initiate research that will directly benefit golf courses or to help a turf student interested in golf course management. Does this support our industry? I think it does.

Conclusions

The MTGF was formed to **"promote and support the turf and grounds industry in Minnesota; to encourage and support research, education and outreach at the University of Minnesota and elsewhere, and to represent allied associations in matters regarding the turf and grounds industry."** We must remember that this organization has only existed three years, and to expect mountains of accomplishments is unfair. After all, it took the MGCSA seventy years to progress to where we are today.

The investment of the MGCSA has been substantial, but to say that we have given up the farm or squandered resources is also unreasonable. This is the first year that we have not profited from the conference, but financial

projections for our current fiscal year still show a profit. Incidentally, if the \$8,000.00 of lost revenue were divided among the MGCSA membership, it would work out to about ten dollars each. From an individual member's standpoint then, you have indirectly paid ten dollars more for a conference that is world class, and contributed to all the other functions that the MTGF performs, including research, scholarship, outreach and networking opportunities.

It should also be noted that the member services provided by the MGCSA has not faltered or diminished in the last three years. On the contrary, through the efforts of your Board of Directors and the business office, we have been able to keep expenses in check and exceed profit projections. *It is possible to improve our association and still support the MTGF.*

There is little doubt that the relationship of the MGCSA and the MTGF will need continued sculpting and nurturing. But to expect too much of the infant before he is able to walk is unfair. Our efforts should instead be focused on helping him to walk, picking him up when he falls, and reaping the rewards when he wins the marathon.



Charlie Pooch, Les Bolstad U of M Golf Course, was busy signing up for all that "free" info on the Trade Show floor.