Set priorities when planning budgets

At any budget level, there's always more you'd like to do. But put safety first, aesthetics second.

by Richard Moffitt

■ Budgeting is a year-round process. Accurate records of expenditures, labor hours and equipment used provide the building blocks on which future budgets are prepared. The upcoming season's preliminary budget actually is being planned during the two years preceding it.

Landscape and turf care budgets often are split into two main categories: the operational budget and the capital improvement budget.

The capital improvement budget is developed from ever-evolving short- and long-range planning. At Saint Louis University, each department or budgeting entity may submit a request for funds for capital improvements. Such requests may be for extensive renovation on existing facilities, major purchases of equipment, the addition of a full-time person to the staff, or similar needs. Generally, a dollar plateau is set. Spending for specific items above this dollar level require approval as capital improvements. All capital improvement budget funds are allocated for specific uses and must be applied as allocated.

Saint Louis University has opted to extend and define the boundaries of our urban campus, and a separate construction division budget has been established to cover this major step. We've acquired new land; upgraded existing buildings and added new ones; and incorporated softscape and hardscape features to enhance and unify the setting.

Turf and landscape features that are incorporated into these expansion or major development projects are specifically designated items, included in the master budget for that project and earmarked for that use. The Grounds Department provides cost recommendations for the project budgets of the construction division, and designs and expedites most of the landscaping portions of these projects, but does not administer that budget.

The Grounds Department's operational budget covers overall operations and all related costs, including general maintenance, replacement and repair; minor improvements; small equipment replacement; employee salaries and benefits; and contract labor and services. Our budget is divided into general categories and by line items under those categories. Every commodity line item is figured out and the totals tallied under a general category. For example, lines items such as fertilizer, seed and sod would be listed under the routine maintenance materials category.

We keep accurate, year-long major maintenance lists, checking the University computerized records monthly. These lists show not only expenditures and where these expenditures are allocated, but also what percentage of the funds have been used from the total budgeted for those items. This information is available to each budgeting entity at any time from the budget office computer system.

Safety first—Our fiscal year begins July 1st. The budget cycle starts in early December. Drafts of both the operational budget and capital improvement budgets are submitted in January or February, depending on the department. Final drafts are submitted in March. Each department has a general idea of the status of budget requests as final drafts are submitted, but actual budget approval is not received until July 1st.

Setting priorities is essential in preparing both the capital improvement and the operational budgets. No matter what the budget level, there's always more you'd like to be able to do. Basically, in planning, and in actual use of funds, we put safety first; aesthetics second.

Prior to submitting the first drafts of the budgets, we talk with facilities users—coaches of sports teams, heads of individual campus facilities, buildings and residence halls, and with the president's office—to get their input on needs and on their priorities. We incorporate as much of this input as possible, but it's up to us to rank the priorities and make the final call on what we submit.

The university administration is supportive of the Grounds department and fully aware of the benefits of a well-landscaped and well-maintained campus in attracting students and drawing alumni backing. Part of the capital improvement program includes raising the current irrigation level of 95 percent to a totally-irrigated campus. Because of the urban setting, the majority of the campus is high-impact, high-visibility. We put great effort into turf and landscape quality and into creating effective color with annuals, perennials and bulbs.

Anything can happen—The budget is a tool, a basic guideline for planned expenditures. But "budget busters" can occur. The operational budget gives us some flexibility within line item allocations.

Because of our geographic location, snow removal costs can make an impact on the entire operational budget. We allocate an "average" amount for snow removal, based on past records and updated to reflect current costs, but Midwest snowfall is seldom average. If snows are light, we can allocate unused funds to other needs in the spring and early summer. If snows are heavy, we may have to

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Moffitt: Capital improvements around the St. Louis University campus to include total irrigation system.

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"borrow" from other line item accounts to cover the costs.

We may use this fund-shifting technique within the operational budget for other reasons, too. For example, additional funds to replace concrete damaged during a car accident or to cover repairs of unexpected equipment breakdowns may be diverted from the landscape renovation category. We do stick to the budgeted line item figures as closely as possible, and must stay within the constraints of the overall operational budget.

We divide the grounds operational budget into three defined seasonal areas: July through fall; winter; and spring through June. Major capital improvement projects and renovation work are accomplished most easily from the third week of May to the second week of August, when fewer people are on campus. But because the "budget year" starts July first, we currently have a tight window in which to get major work done.

Those planning and administering budgets are always looking for ways to cut costs and increase operating efficiency.

In some cases, pre-committing funds to specific uses can be beneficial. We pre-contract with greenhouse growers for production of the specific varieties and quantities of annuals and perennials for campus needs so we're assured of getting what we want, when we need it, at a predetermined price.

We also make pre-season purchases of certain turf and landscape maintenance products. To keep the overall budget in perspective, we note these pre-committed line items as "encumbered" on the budget printout until the funds are actually spent.

We compare the costs and efficiencies of performing various services in-house with the costs of hiring contract labor for those services. For example, we currently use in-house crews for sidewalk snow removal, and contract for the parking lot snow removal which requires a fleet of heavy equipment.

We analyze equipment use, down-time records and maintenance and repair costs. Equipment replacement is scheduled into the appropriate budget as effective usage time drops and cost of use escalates. Despite a good preventive maintenance program, we always include a line item figure for unexpected repairs.

We keep records of all outside expenditures that were not included in the original budget to determine if they merit a line item budget allocation for the next year.

Budgeting takes commitment. It's a matter of weighing the effect of defined needs and fund requests for their impact on the overall short-term and long term goals. It is essential; an effective program requires solid guidelines.

—Richard Moffitt is Superintendent of Grounds for Saint Louis University, St. Louis, Mo., and a board member of the national Sports Turf Managers Association.

10 top turf tips

■ David Oatis of the USGA Green Section looks at all the "turf tips" his organization has produced in the past 12 years.

"We're not playing the same game on golf courses we played 10 to 15 years ago," he says, speaking to the New Jersey Turfgrass Expo. "Championship conditions of 20 years ago we surpass on a daily basis now. Plant material is superior, we have faster greens, wonderful research, genetic engineering on the horizon, and weed-resistant varieties.

"The best ideas come from everyday superintendents who are just trying to do their job better."

He picks his top 10, pointed at the northeast sector that he serves. Here are his choices, in decreasing importance:

#10 - Using grooming and rolling—with "good common sense and moderation"—to produce a smoother, faster putting surface.

#9 - Using a high-tech camera to find out what's inside drain pipes if you have a high sand green and aren't getting good drainage.

#8 - Using 2x4 wood to level new greens (like you would concrete), or renting high-tech laser equipment.

#7 - Separating the layers of soil, for courses with non-homogenenous soil profiles, to get tested. Don't mix the layers.

#6 - Deep aerify greens with Floyd McKay or Verti-Drain or Hydroject machines. "This isn't a panacea, but a good idea if done properly," Oatis says. First, though, check for proper soil moisture so the aerification process is successful.

#5 - "Hire someone with a computer to accurately diagnose irrigation coverage problems. You can use it to simulate what effect changes would have in coverage without ever going out in the field and trying them," Oatis notes.

#4 - Using burlap bags filled with soil as edging when rebuilding sand bunkers. You can sod right over the bags, which decompose with time.

#3 - Installing supplemental irrigation systems for the banks around greens.

#2 - Using asphalt or clay tampers to make sand bunkers playable almost immediately. "But do it before you open the hole for play," Oatis says, "because you don't want to get a reputation for having soft sand."

#1 - Using time-lapse photos (one hour apart) to chart the path of shade across any greens at which you need to take down trees. These photos will prove to members that the trees were doing more harm than good.

Oatis: Time-lapse photography can help superintendents.

"At clubs with members with a sense of humor," he suggests using chain saws with the names "Thunder" and "Lightning." "You can safely and honestly say," he notes, "in response to members with questions about tree removal that 'thunder and lightning got it.'"

—Jerry Roche