

STATE OF THE INDUSTRY



Playing the budget game to win

With the same amount of money or less in their budgets compared to last year, athletic field managers told LM they are stretching their dollars to make it work.

by SHARON CONNORS / Contributing Editor

In the field of budget increases, athletic managers struck out. Annual operating budgets for 1997 are the same as in 1996 for 36 percent of LM's readers polled by Readex Inc., Stillwater, Minn.

Six percent said their budgets were cut.

Some field managers were forced to postpone new equipment purchases while others reduced seasonal help. Whatever the case, they wanted to make sure that their fields did not suffer.

Although Mike Andresen, athletic turf manager at Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, had a budget cut he remains committed, "Because I'm dealing with athletes and coaches, recruiting is a big issue. Good game fields and good practice facilities are vital to getting good athletes in here," says Andresen.

"Iowa State took a big step a year ago and took out the artificial turf and put in grass. Once you get good athletes, you have to take care of them and make sure that they're

playing on fields that don't have holes"

Pitching for dollars

The number one argument that field managers used to get as many dollars out of the budget as possible was need for safe playing surfaces. They tried to point out to management the severity of any unsafe field. Aesthetics was another reason to push for money.

"You've got to be able to show (management) what it's going to be used for and how it will look," says Todd Whitrock, sites maintenance technician at Sierra High School, Colorado Springs, Colo.

"You can show them what the safety factors are. You have to have safe fields for playgrounds and athletic fields."

Gil Higgins, parks foreman for the City of Prescott, Prescott, Ariz., adds that, "If you've got liabilities out there,

spending \$20,000 to fix something instead of having a \$5 or \$6 million lawsuit against you, it's pretty easy to convince people."

Roger Bowman, grounds supervisor at the University of Delaware, Newark, Del., believes it helps to pair safety concerns with appearance factors.

"You have to look at it not only from a safety standpoint and the importance of maintaining safe playing surfaces but, also you need to convince them from an aesthetic standpoint. With a higher level of funding not only do you increase the safety of the field, but you also increase the appearance of the field."

Time out for aerating

Many sports turf pros maintained anywhere from five to 52 fields ranging from



Andresen: athletes depend on field crews.

soccer, football and softball to multi-purpose. No matter the sport, managers emphasized the need for core aeration. Most stressed the cooperation of coaches was vital to successful aeration.

"Springtime is our difficult

time of the year," says James Flynn, superintendent of parks and grounds, Wilton, Ct.

"We'll try to take a field or two out of service every year and give it a season to rejuvenate itself. We aggressively aerate it and seed it, let it grow back and keep people off of it for a while."

Tom Burns, director-major league field operations for the Texas Rangers, Arlington, Texas, says work on that major league field is set for when the team is out of town.

"This is a brand new field, we just replaced it last year," says Burns. "A lot of times at the end of a home stand we'll have a day game. The last few weeks, as soon as the game's over we're out there with the aerifiers and the verticutters. That gives us that much more time before the next home stand."

Pat Boyer, superintendent of parks/city forester for Morgan Parks Department, Fort Morgan, says soccer fields are the toughest to maintain.

"We do a core aerification twice per year," says Boyer. "We developed a sports blend turf mix with two Kentucky bluegrasses and three perennial ryegrasses. We will overseed the entire area twice a year. We try to look at those areas that receive the most wear such as in front of the goals and around the goals. If possible we move those goals on a weekly basis so that wear goes into other areas. We try to overseed those areas on a continual basis," he adds.

Bowman explains the reasoning behind a recent equipment purchase as one of saving time.

"We've just purchased a plug pulverizer so that when we aerify fields we can come back and pulverize the plugs. We can put that field back into play within a day and the coaches don't even know we've been on there."

Most of the athletic field managers that spoke to LM do not subcontract work out because they liked having

one high school are under construction. "It gives us a chance to get geared up for the following year for manpower and equipment," Fordyce says.

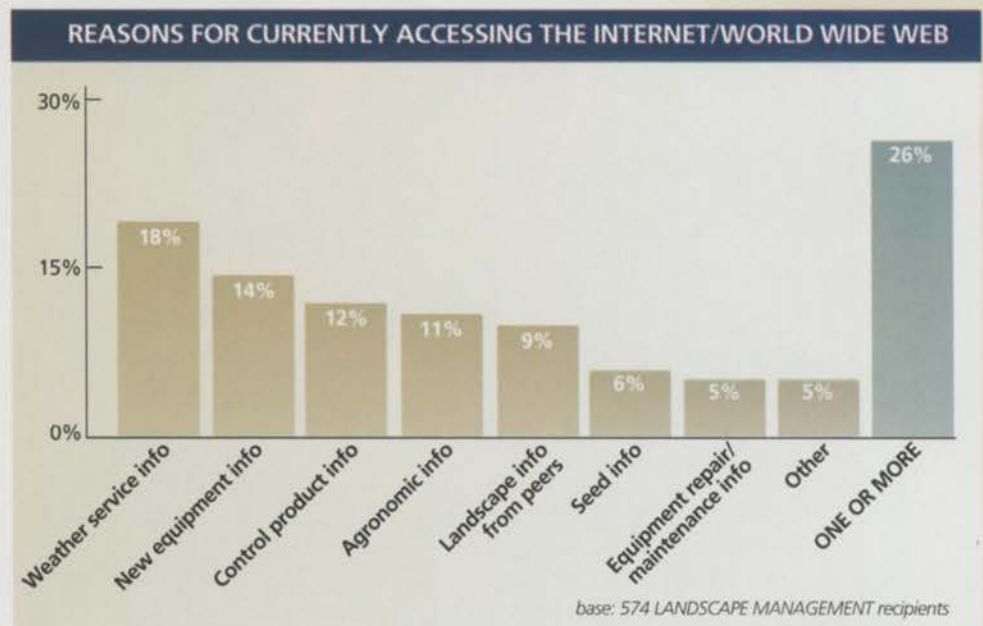
"Right now I have two sites that are under maintenance contract and I'm going to have one more."

Good catches

Unlike most other areas of the green industry where employees are concerned, sports facilities are finding employees with relative ease. Most

sity and taken an intern," says Andresen, who also employs athletes who have student aid that needs to be used up, or work/study people. There's always good hardworking students at the university looking for jobs."

Adds Higgins, "Where we're at, as hard as it is to find a job, if we post an opening for a permanent full-time position, regardless of the pay, we have anywhere from 50 to 250 applications for that job. A job with vacation, benefits



control of it themselves. One did subcontract because of new construction.

Bill Fordyce, grounds foreman for Douglas County School District, Castle Rock, Colo., has been subcontracting for the first year only on new sites. Located between Denver and Colorado Springs, his is the fastest growing school district in the nation. Three elementary schools and

comes from word of mouth from other employees.

"We're able to get a lot of people who have day jobs to work for us. A lot of times you end up getting better quality employees because of that," says Mike Boekholder, head groundskeeper for the Durham Bulls Baseball Club, Durham, NC.

"We've gone to the turf grass program at the univer-

and sick leave is pretty attractive to a lot of people."

While concerns for finding reliable workers are low, athletic field managers concentrate on getting budgets where they need to be. With more money to work with, fields are bound to be safer, better looking, and in the long run, will require less maintenance.