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AS WE SEE IT

JERRY ROCHE, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



There's always room for managerial improvement

You may think that you are doing everything you can to make your business or maintenance department the most efficient it can be.

But you're probably not.

Managing effectively—especially for those of us without degrees in business administration—is a never-ending learning experience. So, as we begin a new growing season, a review of the expert tips offered in a long list of winter educational seminars is perhaps in order:

● **Choose employees carefully, and treat them respectfully.** Fire fast, but hire slowly. Hire personalities opposite of yours so you have a good balance of talent. Do everything you can—good pay, good working environment, a wide variety of benefits and perks—to keep your best employees.

● **Take your customer relations to another level.** Answer every question and handle every complaint quickly and effectively. If you don't have a pager or cellular phone, get one immediately.

● **Communicate.** Personally see your most important customers—for golf course superintendents, that would be members of the greens committee—at least once, and preferably more often, during the off-season. During the growing season, see them at least once a month, in person, if not more. Use signs on the golf course, newsletters, informative lawn/landscape brochures, pamphlets and doorhangers. Answer mail—both written and voice—personally and quickly.

● **Computerize.** If you're already computerized, figure out new ways to use your computer. For instance, try adding a fax/modem so you can subscribe to information services like those offered by the Turfgrass Information File or the American Society of Landscape Architects.

● **Choose your dealer/distributor carefully.** Make sure your salesperson is knowledgeable. Ask about financing, rebate, lease and regional discount programs. Ask about back-up equipment. Ask about train-

ing. Ask for industry references.

● **Set up your own turfgrass test plots,** if possible. Use your own backyard, your business's lawn or—with permission and using a great deal of care—your customers' backyards. Ask suppliers for free trial products, and offer them results of your trials in return.

● **Get involved.** You only get out of your industry as much as you put in. Take an active role in local, state and/or national organizations. Do what you can, for as long as you can—whether it's a week, a month or three years.

● **Remember the importance of good media relations.** Let the local news outlets know of your successes. If you're contacted by reporters, be pleasant. If you're busy, say so, but suggest a good time to call back. Control the circumstances as much as possible. Don't be argumentative or antagonistic or afraid to talk. Remember to tell the media that you are an environmentalist, that creating a friendly environment for golfers and homeowners is your business, your livelihood.

● **Don't be afraid to change.** The green industry is ever evolving. Take advantage of new technologies.

● **Finally, have fun.** Learn to focus on things you can change rather than banging your head against the wall on things you can't change. Never undertake more than one stressful activity or project at a time. Delegate authority. And take 30 minutes a day to relax in your own way, whether it's playing basketball with the guys at lunch (as I do) or reading a chapter in a favorite book. Your mind and body are your most important tools. Take care of them.

Jerry Roche

LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT

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READER ADVISORY PANEL

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Rye, N.Y.

Rod Bailey
Evergreen Services
Bellevue, Wash.

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Mahoney Golf Course
Lincoln, Neb.

Charlie Racusin
Environmental Ldsc. Services
Houston, Tex.

Jack Robertson
Robertson Lawn Care
Springfield, Ill.

Steve Wightman
Jack Murphy Stadium
San Diego, Calif.

LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT

EDITORIAL STAFF—Fax: (216) 891-2675
JERRY ROCHE, Editor-in-Chief: (216) 826-2830
TERRY McIVER, Managing Editor: (216) 891-2709
RON HALL, Senior Editor: (216) 891-2636
LISA BODNAR, Graphic Designer: (216) 891-3101
MAUREEN HREHOICK, Group Editor: (216) 826-2829

BUSINESS STAFF—Fax: (218) 891-2675
JOHN D. PAYNE, Publisher: (216) 891-2786
JUDY MIDUCKI, Production Manager: (218) 723-9281
ALEX DeBARR, Group Publisher: (216) 891-2789
ROSY BRADLEY, Senior Production Manager: (218) 723-9352
DEBI HARMER, Production Director: (218) 723-9325
LESLIE MONTGOMERY, Administrative Coordinator: (216) 826-2856

ADVERTISING OFFICES

CLEVELAND (HEADQUARTERS) OFFICE

7500 Old Oak Blvd.
Cleveland, OH 44130
Phone: (216) 243-8100
Fax: (216) 891-2675

JOHN D. PAYNE, Publisher: (216) 891-2786
ROBERT OHLSEN, National Sales Manager: (216) 891-2682
TODD MILLER, District Sales Manager: (216) 891-2605
STEPHANIE STIGGERS-SMITH, Classified Ad Mgr.: (216) 891-2719
LESLIE MONTGOMERY, Admin. Coordinator: (216) 826-2856

SEATTLE OFFICE

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ASK THE EXPERT

DR. BALAKRISHNA RAO



Fertilization at planting

Problem: How long should we wait to fertilize newly-planted trees? Is there a problem with fertilizing at planting? (New York)

Solution: Most plants can tolerate and benefit from fertilizers at planting. But you should preferably use a slow-release source of nitrogen with low burn potential and salt indexes. Slow-release fertilizers containing a ureaformaldehyde have been used at planting time by arborists without apparent injury.

Fertilizing after planting can be done any time. Even in this case, I would use a slow-release nitrogen source. A sub-surface liquid injection method is preferable to obtain distribution of nutrients throughout the rootball. However, some arborists believe that nutrients applied on the rootball surface, at the top of the rootball, will be readily available to roots. Fertilizer applied with the backfill soil may leach and may not be available to rootball roots.

Phosphorus, which does not move in the soil, is better applied in the planting hole and/or mixed with backfill soil at planting. Phosphorus is beneficial in the root initiation and development. Surface application of phosphorus may not be very beneficial to trees.

Fertilizer practices have received a lot of attention recently as arborists attempt to maximize plant health while minimizing environmental concerns. More research is needed to determine the most effective treatments.

Reader response: weed control fabric

These comments from an "Ask the Expert" reader:

"In an issue last year, you gave advice on controlling weeds around trees. I thought you might be interested in some research and field experience that suggests that Biobarrier Root Control System fabric, which is designed to stop roots from damaging hardscapes, will control surface vegetation for up to 10 years when covered with one to three inches of rock, mulch or soil.

"Biobarrier works by releasing very small amounts of trifluralin over an extended period of time. Trifluralin in very minute concentrations—15 ppm and less—stops root cell division and therefore prevents successful germination of seeds."

The information that I received suggests that Biobarrier provides good weed control, no vegetation at the tree skirt seam, and no surface roots. The report said that "the greatest weed control was obtained with a combination of geotextiles/pre-emergence herbicide (trifluralin) disk, indicating a possible new method of weed control in containers."

We are not familiar with this practice. Should you be interested, try it on a small scale. For further information, contact Reemay, the maker of Biobarrier, at (800) 284-2780 in Tennessee.

Tree root pruning

Problem: How do you remove and prevent tree roots from growing inside sewer pipes? How do the roots get inside the pipes? We

run into a few problems of this nature every year. Any comments? (New York)

Solution: Tree roots often enter sewer pipelines through cracks or joints. Cracks may result from freezing and thawing, or from expanding roots pushing against the pipe, creating small openings that allow fine roots to enter pipes. Inside the pipes, moisture, nutrients and air are favorable for the roots to grow. Continued growth results in clogging the pipes. This would warrant corrective measures.

If the pipes are clogged, we suggest using a mechanical router or snake to clean the lines. Reports indicate that a combination of metasodium (Vapam) and dichlobenil (Casoron) which comes as either a liquid (Vaparoot Plus) or a foam (Vaporoot) formulation can also be used. Since Vapam is a Restricted Use product, trained professionals with special equipment are needed for application. Also, make sure to follow good handling procedures.

Another option is to use copper sulfate to unclog sewer lines, but it is toxic and may affect the sewage treatment. To prevent future clogging problems, a product such as Biobarrier wrapped around sewer pipe joints when they are installed may be beneficial. For pipes already installed, it would be very expensive to use a barrier because of the need to expose the pipes before wrapping.

Consider all these options and discuss with professionals who provide remedial services for sewer pipe clogs. Read and follow label specification for best results.

Dealing with subsoil

Problem: Can limestone or similar clay-base soil be used over a slate or shale subsoil for a prospective turf area? This situation has been known to cause turf to burn up and dry out. Sometimes, avoiding the problem can be inconvenient and costly. (Pennsylvania)

Solution: Mr. Richard Rathjens, senior agronomist for the Davey Company, suggests:

"A favorable rootzone for turfgrass growth can be constructed above a slate or shale subsoil. Commonly-used materials for this purpose include organic materials such as peat, mineral soils (loams or sandy loams) or sands. Depending on the existing soil, a partial modification or complete replacement may be necessary. You may wish to consult with turfgrass specialists in your area to determine the best strategy."

Dr. Balakrishna Rao is Manager of Research and Technical Development for the Davey Tree Co., Kent, Ohio.

Mail questions to "Ask the Expert," LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT, 7500 Old Oak Blvd., Cleveland, OH 44130. Please allow two to three months for an answer to appear in the magazine.

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Circle No. 136 on Reader Inquiry Card



Privatization: a term that strikes fear into the hearts of some landscape managers, but inspires dreams of new business among others. These green industry 'privateers' have learned along the way.

by Ron Hall
and Terry McIver

■ Cities and schools, because of increasing demands on tax dollars, are asking their managers "to do more with less."

This, and other mostly economic reasons, are increasingly causing cities to enter into partnerships with private contractors to provide services that the cities themselves had previously offered.

Usually these services are revenue producers: waste hauling, marina and airport operations, and golf courses.

This is called privatization.

We spoke with four landscape contractors and one golf course superintendent to learn how they obtain contracts, complete work on time, and survive the bidding wars that seem more intense in the municipal arena.

(We'd like to know your successes in municipal contracting—or just what you've learned from the experience, good and bad—for coverage in a future issue. Write or call us in care of: LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT, 7500 Old Oak Blvd., Cleveland, OH 44130.)

Going private?

Privatization need not mean civil service layoffs, Memphis finds out

■ George Meeks's shoes are polished to a high luster. The suit is dark and nicely cut, the white shirt crisp. The silk tie is red. Meeks both looks and speaks the language of the successful grounds manager, emphasis on *manager*.

He's grounds director for Memphis (Tenn.) City Schools. He's also a walking, talking advertisement for privatization: the competitive contracting of so-called support services to the private sector.

Meeks is one of 12 managers that the international service company ServiceMaster, Management Services Division, assembled to oversee maintenance, custodial and grounds for all 160 schools in the Memphis public system.

The privatization of services in Memphis is not isolated. Schools from New York to New Orleans to the Pacific Northwest have made similar decisions with private companies—more than 300, say some reports.

Squeezed between rising costs and taxpayers' howls, school boards see hiring private contractors as a way to get professional service. And also to save taxpayer money. Curiously, most schools experience significant savings both because of competitive bidding and superior efficiencies, say proponents of contracting. Indeed, services as varied as transportation to preparing noonday meals are now being

contracted to private companies.

Turning off alarms—This is the third year of the \$17.5 million, five-year agreement between Memphis schools and ServiceMaster. Although the school board's June 1993 decision, by a 7-2 vote,



George Meeks says private management can energize a school system's grounds department.

to hire ServiceMaster initially alarmed school union employees, the controversy subsided when ServiceMaster indicated that instead of layoffs, the schools' own employees would get training and professional supervision instead.

This is exactly what's happened.



ServiceMaster is improving the grounds at 40 Memphis public schools each year until all 160 have grass.

School grounds employees, in fact, have been involved in on-going training ever since, grins Meeks.

"What we found out was that the people just didn't have the training. They didn't have the resources to call on," he explains. "These were things that we could bring to the table very quickly."

Meeks saw Memphis schools ground maintenance as more than a money-and-resources problem. Morale suffered, too—both employee and student morale. The campuses of many schools were defined by weeds and bare earth. They made inviting

targets for discarded wrappers and soda cans.

Sprucing up—The retrained and redirected grounds crews quickly began following a systematic schedule of mowing, pruning, trimming and mulching. Meeks describes these as "high-visual impact

landscape improvements" that almost immediately demonstrate the value of landscaping.

Grass is cut once every two weeks. Hedges are trimmed. The grass is fertilized to a schedule by school employees who are certified applicators. Litter is picked up.

Also, the school system's grounds department regrassed (bermudagrass) the grounds of 40 schools last year, and plans on completing all 160 within four years.

"We should be setting the tone for the education process," says Meeks, who sees his biggest challenge as convincing

grounds employees that they too are vitally important to the schools' success.

"Sometimes the grounds employees feel like they're the lowest employees in a system," says Meeks. "That's because the grounds department of a school is typically run by somebody in maintenance. Maybe somebody with a background in plumbing or carpentry, and all they want to do is get the property mowed."

Specialized training, precise and detailed schedules and programs to reward conscientious efforts are changing that in the Memphis schools, he believes.

"I want everybody in grounds to know that if they do their job good enough, then my job is to make sure they're recognized," says Meeks.

Just two years into the program, improvements to the Memphis city school grounds are catching the eye of professional educators and the public alike. The Memphis daily newspaper has written several articles recognizing the more attractive grounds.

Said city school principal Dr. Rebecca Giannini in one of the articles: "The lawn is beautiful...There is a correlation between the way the school looks and how the kids function in school."

Meeks, a graduate of Mississippi State University and a former grounds manager at Prairie View A&M University in Texas, sees his experience with ServiceMaster as another step in his goal of someday helping beautify America's historical African-American colleges.

"There is a tremendous potential in the landscape business, but we have to tackle these types of projects with a business manager mentality," he adds.

—Ron Hall

Bidding 'wars', busy fields make private contracting a risk

■ City service directors shop for the best price—just as many homeowners—and assume quality despite the low price.

Kevin O'Connor, general manager of Sequoia Lawn Care, Wyckoff, N.J., has done projects for municipalities since 1982. Bidding, he says, can sometimes resemble a "war," with at least three companies vying for contracts. And the lowest bid always wins.

"I'll make an area look like the Taj Mahal, and a competitor can come in with a lower bid—and, of course it's public knowledge on what the bid was from the previous year," says O'Connor. "There are some

products they do not have to use because everything's looking good from the previous year, and therefore, those products aren't part of the first year overhead."

Sequoia services a dozen municipal contracts and four or five area schools. Most have been acquired through word-of-mouth, but some have required bids.

"It get's kind of crazy, but most of the municipalities that I deal with are pretty loyal, and I'm loyal to them as far as fair price and excellent work.

"I had a municipality here since 1985, and last year was the first year they had the work bid."

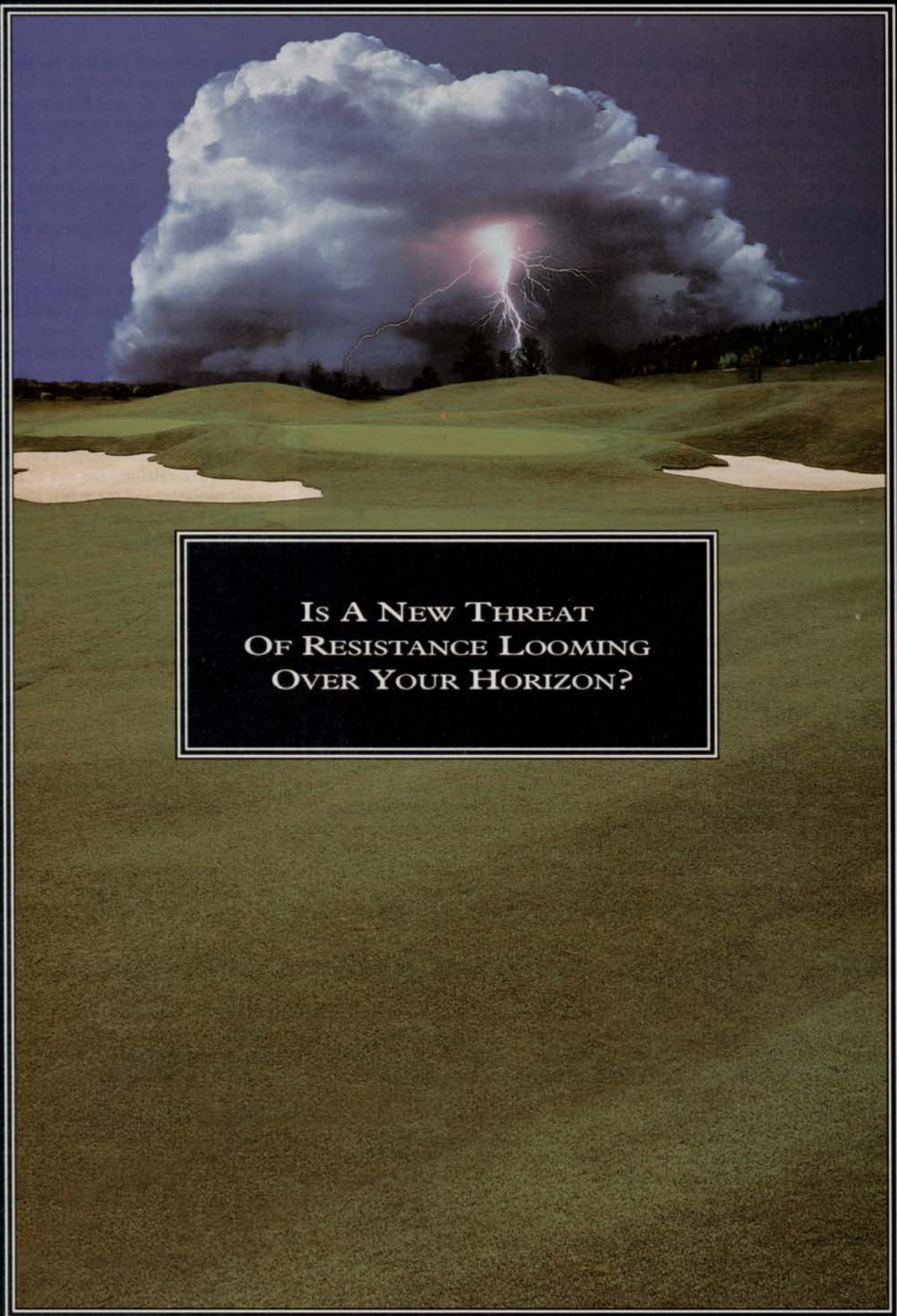
Liability concerns—O'Connor thinks the fear of liability is one reason why city governments seek out a private contractor to apply control products.

"I have a lot of municipalities where the superintendent does have a pesticide license," explains O'Connor, "but he does not want that liability. He'd rather sub it out because (the liability) is not directly on him."

Persons on a notification list must be informed of applications 48 hours in advance.

Timing of control product applications and other work can be tricky when the

continued on page 10



IS A NEW THREAT
OF RESISTANCE LOOMING
OVER YOUR HORIZON?

The threat of resistance is very real. Reports are coming in that repeated applications of the same family of fungicides have forced resistant strains of disease pathogens.

Brown Patch, Dollar Spot and Leaf Spot are creeping back, even after treatment.

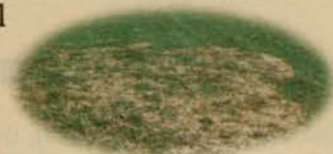
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PRIVATE from page 7

patient is a much-used municipal athletic field.

"These fields are so much overplayed," says O'Connor. "You have soccer from dawn to dusk; we need 24 hours (after the application) before anyone can go on to that field."

Consequently, says O'Connor, applications at 4 a.m. or 6 p.m. are not uncommon.

"Everyone has to get the lawn cut. Crews are so stretched sometimes there's just enough time in a 7:30-to-3 p.m. day. There's no overtime. Manpower is minimal, two, three men for a field."

Stay in touch—O'Connor keeps the Sequoia name in front of prospective muni/school board decision makers via letters or telephone calls.

A free, trial application is not out of question, either. "Let them see what you can do," advises O'Connor.

"Superintendents and public works administrators talk to one another, so there's some opportunity for referral there."

—Terry McIver

On the golf front: 'Leasing' not an easy decision

■ In 1990, after three years of study, the Fort Worth (Texas) City Council voted to lease (privatize) two of its five golf courses to management companies.

Those courses were the Rockwood (27 holes) and the Z Boaz (18 holes). Contracts were eight-year primary terms with two two-year options.

In 1993, City Council asked its Parks and Community Services Department Golf Division (PACSD) to review the feasibility of leasing one or all three of the remaining golf courses: Pecan Valley (36 holes), Meadowbrook (18 holes) and Sycamore Creek (9 holes with double tees.)

At that time, PACSD sent requests for information to 15 different management companies. Comparing the information received, the city decided not to lease any remaining golf courses.

This decision was based on the current performance of the PACSD operations and that leasing the three remaining courses would eliminate the competitive model and the alternative resources necessary to operate the course and protect the infrastructure in the event of a default.

PACSD provides a range of services at its three remaining city-owned-and-operated courses including the sale of golf merchandise, individual and group lessons, organizational services for tournaments, and support for golf associations.

The driving policy at PACSD is service. But costs and efficiency are obviously important, too. All, in fact, must be weighed when comparing self-operation with leasing (privatization).

But there are other issues that aren't so easily factored into arguments either for or against privatization.

For instance, 17 of 55 (about 30 percent) of the city golf course employees were let go because of the leasing of the two municipal courses.

Also, will the private management firm be able to operate the municipal course profitably without raising fees beyond what

entry-level players can afford? Beginning golfers typically start on city courses.

Privatization of golf courses can be more profitable for a municipality than a city's operation if the municipality maintains a policy of recommending fee adjustments on an operational need basis only. However, if adjustments are made in line with a capital improvement program or a predetermined incremental percentage, the profitability differential is eliminated and additional capital improvements and revenues can be realized under city operations.

But privatization is not the cure-all for service delivery. All service delivery decisions must be made on a case-by-case basis.

What works in one city may not work in

another. However, the lessons learned by other cities can be studied to shorten the process of determining a successful approach to service delivery.



—George Kruzick, CGCS, is a golf course superintendent with the Fort Worth Parks and Community Services Department. He spoke at the most recent GCSAA Conference.

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TO LEASE OR NOT TO LEASE?...

Five years of managing "lease" contracts for golf course services allows the Fort Worth Parks and Community Services Department to make the following points:

IN FAVOR OF LEASING:

- 1) Guaranteed income.** The leasing agreement stipulates a specific minimum and/or a percentage of the gross, whichever is higher.
- 2) Profit motive.** A contractor must make a profit to remain in business, and should be alert to new methods, ideas and trends.
- 3) Public relations.** If the course is managed well, the city reaps good public relations.
- 4) Personnel.** The private contractor has more staffing flexibility.
- 5) Purchasing ability.** A contractor can often get supplies and materials faster, and sometimes at a better price if it's a large operation.
- 6) Specialized training.** A contractor can often supply employees that specialize in food and beverage concessions, or golf shop merchandising.

IN FAVOR OF SELF-OPERATION:

- 1) Control.** The city has total control of the type, level and quality of service, prices and products.
- 2) Revenues.** The city receives all profits.
- 3) Personnel.** The city uses existing staff. (In the case of the Fort Worth PACSD this would be over 250 years combined years experience in golf.)
- 4) Commercialism** is avoided in a self-operated course.
- 5) Private profit** at the expense of the public is avoided.