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# STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

ample, on seed. Fertilizer has increased as much as 14 percent. Many are absorbing those price increases.

"I don't see that we can really pass on more than 3 to 4 percent to the client. Contracts are set for the year. Therefore, if we see any cost increases, we've got to internalize it and make up the difference on our margins," according to John Debell Jr., president of Clippers Inc., Chantilly, Va.

"If you start cutting costs, the perception that you give is you're cutting services or scrimping on product," adds John Buechner, director of technical services, Lawn Doctor Inc., Marlboro, NJ.

Jon Cundiff, president of

## 21 percent of lawn care companies surveyed say they will increase mowing prices.

Turf's Up Lawn Service, Lee's Summit, MO, says, "part of the increase in price comes from the latest technology and the latest products that give us better results. By doing that we are able to get them better results and better service, which enables us to justify the slight increase."

### Worker woes

Not unlike other areas of the green industry, lawn care employers are having a hard time finding employees.

Nineteen percent of those employers surveyed said it was due to lack of a readily-available supply of labor.



"The pool of available workers has shrunk to nothing. It's extremely difficult to get good people," says Lang. "When you get them you have to pay them more and give

them better benefits."

Joe Munie, president of Munie Outdoor Services, Belleville, Ill., says, "we've had a tough time finding the right people. One of things we're doing is working harder on interviewing and taking more time and effort trying to find those people."

Adds Nick Dennis, Pro-Lawn Plus, Jacksonville, Fla., "we had a good year hiring this year. We kept most of our people. But we hired two extra people this year just to make sure that we had backups."

Buechner of Lawn Doctor suggested hiring more people

on a part-time basis or fewer people, but paying more money—hoping to attract a more reliable employee.

In his 17th year of business, Pool said, "Now, if you hire someone 18 to 25, it's my experience that they want to walk in the door and make more money than I do and

late 40s early 50s. They walk in the door with a benefit package," says Pool.

Lang says, "We have benefit packages that only much larger companies could afford to offer. We're having to do those things to attract employees and keep them. In the summer when it's so hot, we shut down at noon on Friday."

This year lawn care contractors will be searching for that special formula to combat overgrown competition they face when it comes to hiring and pricing. Trimming back some of their services or applying good marketing techniques might help them stay in business.

Buechner adds, "it's the age-old struggle, you have low price and poor service. Or, you try to provide good service at a competitive price. Hopefully the marketplace makes a decision to buy quality, not price."



Dennis: hires back-up help.

want to have as much authority and power as I do. My philosophy is not to hire anyone under 30. I'm having excellent luck with finding people that work for factories taking early retirements or buyouts in their

# Golf course equipment care a growing concern

**G**olf course superintendents are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of equipment managers and mechanics. Equipment operation is so important that 40 percent of those surveyed for LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT by Readex Inc., Stillwater, Minn., said they run equipment training programs.

"It's very difficult to find good people who are trained in the green industry as mechanics. Good mechanics are not hard to come by, but good mechanics that are trained in the golf course business are very hard to come by.

Typically when they find a job, their superintendents pay them well enough that they don't want to leave where they are," says Steve Cook, CGCS, Golf Course Manager, Oakland Hills Country Club, Bloomfield Hills, Mich.

"We need mechanics in the industry and technicians as much as people with degrees trying to get superintendent's jobs," says W.P. Montague, MG, CGCS, superintendent, Oakwood Club, Cleveland Hts., Ohio.

Bob Foos, superintendent of Lake Shore Country Club, Rochester, NY replies, "At our club we're real big on educa-

*With good golf equipment mechanics in short supply, rough turf may be ahead for golf course superintendents.*

by SHARON CONNERS/Contributing Editor

tion so any time we can send somebody away to a seminar or a school we like to do that. We're finding out that an equipment manager is probably more important than an assistant superintendent just because equipment is so expensive, it's so sophisticated now, you have to have good maintenance for equipment."

According to Dave Radaj, superintendent of Wokanda Club, Des Moines, Iowa, "The majority of the mechanics I see are coming from other parts of the industry. Our mechanic came from working on farm equipment. . . . The biggest asset to the mechanics are the manufacturer schools for their education."



## STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

Although most say their equipment is maintained on site, occasionally it is sent out for repairs such as grinding.

### Drive for support

Some superintendents speaking to LM are dissatisfied with manufacturer/distributor support.

"The people that sell the (equipment) are weak in technical support or in support after you buy something. They spend more money at selling something than making sure it's right after they sell it," says Dan Williams, golf course superintendent of Riverview Country Club, Appleton, Wisc.

"Parts availability is really getting tough. Nobody stocks the parts that we used to be able to get pretty quickly a couple years ago. We've got a cart sitting on the hoist right now that's been here almost two weeks."

In contrast Radaj says, "There's probably three or four major players as far as equipment goes and they're all fighting for our business. They all have good equipment. They know that service will make the difference. For the amount of money that you spend on most of the equipment they should do what you need to have the equipment work right. I've found that all of them that I've worked with will bend over backwards to get the job done right."

### No putts about safety

Many golf courses subcontract tree planting and large landscape projects like railroad tie walls. Some subcontract pruning and spring prep on ornamental beds. The top reasons for subcontracting are safety and cost.

Corey Eastwood, CGCS, Stockdale Country Club, Bakersfield, Calif., says, "I don't



Superintendents such as Daryl Decker, CGCS, of Arrowhead CC in Canton, Ohio, help out in a pinch, but they still need good help.

want my guys up in a high lift or climbing trees. It's a combination of expertise and safety. The workman's comp rate on a tree man is pretty high. He would have to have a helper. So we contract out between

\$15,000 and \$25,000 a year to a tree service."

Mark Wilson, CGCS, Valhalla Golf Club, Louisville, Ky., says, "You don't have the expense of gearing yourself up with some of the equipment that these (contractors) use. Usually you're getting an operator that uses this equipment every day."

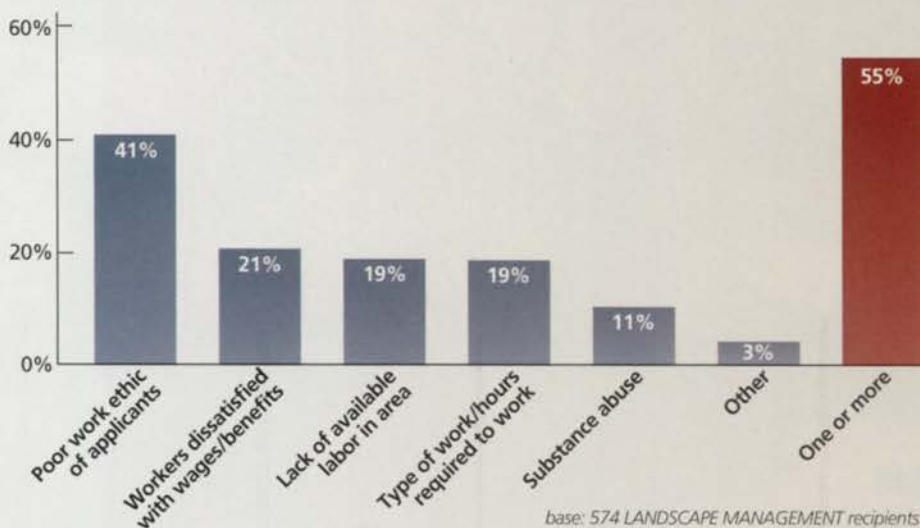
### Teed off with wages

Trouble finding good help was a complaint for more than half of those surveyed by LM. Twenty-one percent say it is because workers are dissatisfied with wages and benefits.

Williams says its a problem finding reliable workers. "As the market's dried up, it's so competitive. It's not just wages that's the issue, it's benefits that go with it." Beginning pay is \$6 or \$7 an hour.

Montague says, "In our job market they would rather go

### REASONS FOR EXPERIENCING DIFFICULTY IN FINDING DEPENDABLE WORKERS



work for McDonald's and Wendy's where they can work their own hours and be around their friends and not have to deal with [the weather] like we do outdoors."

In contrast, Wilson doesn't find getting reliable workers hard. "I created a system of working a lot of college interns whereas they want to get a career in turf management. The other reason is, I got a pretty strong full-time staff. Also, my third group of people is retirees that have been returning every year."

When asked what their secret to success was, most credited their employees. It's also a matter of managing their time. Radaj says it's important to make sure that employees know what they're supposed to do. "To know what's going on you have to be out on the course a lot during the day," says Radaj.

#### **Budgets are fair**

On average superintendents received a three to four



**With near full-employment, the need to find workers who take direction well and follow through on the job is especially great.**

percent cost-of-living budget increase. They seemed to be content with that.

Eastwood has the same budget as last year. "It's never enough. But, we can work with that to the satisfaction of most members."

LM's survey revealed labor costs accounted for 41 percent of total operating budgets. "The biggest part of any budget is the labor and that is the hardest part to control," says Radaj.

Wilson says he has less

money to work with than last year. "Last year, we hosted a major championship, but we also had a new clubhouse and a lot of construction. We're

different from the average course in several ways.

"A high-caliber golf course is much more artistic, as far as in the maintenance. It's really not

### *LM's survey revealed labor costs accounted for 41 percent of total operating budgets.*

doing less major projects and doing more just maintenance." Wilson feels that Valhalla is

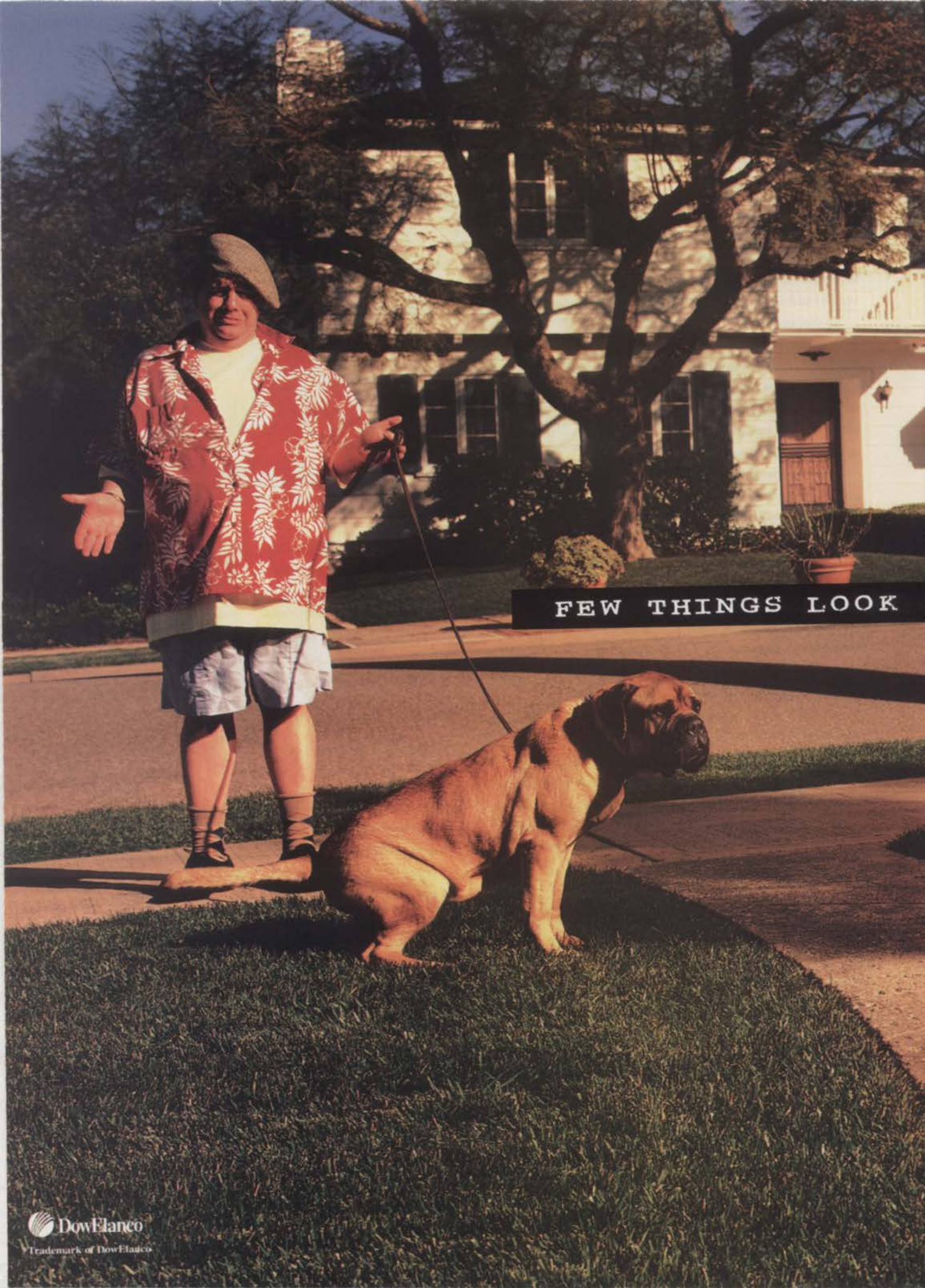
a job, it's more a compassion, a competitive nature, to be good.

"The average golf course doesn't get the support from the committees they're involved with or the financial backing to be competitive. It's in major sports where you have general management that backs it," says Wilson.

With budgets finally up to par with what they need to be, superintendents will likely be spending more time trying to find good mechanics. Who knows there could be a good mechanic out there who is training right now to be a superintendent.



**Equipment care is especially crucial in light of high equipment costs.**



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# 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.

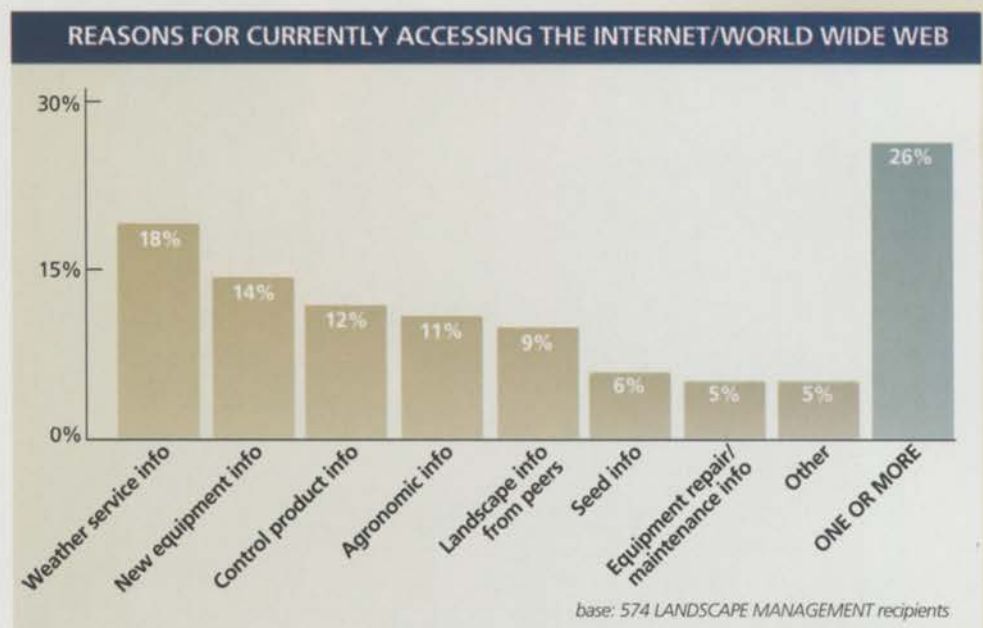
"Right now I have two sites that are under maintenance contract and I'm going to have one more."

#### 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.



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