Little Details Equal BIG SAVINGS

Help keep golf courses competitive in a challenging economic climate

Economically speaking, this country may not ever get back to the way it once was. And, if it does, it's going to take much longer than originally expected. Not surprisingly, the golf market has been impacted along with virtually every other industry, but perhaps even more as the discretionary income of many Americans is evaluated.

At municipal courses like Springbrook and Naperbrook, located in the Naperville area 35 miles west of Chicago, there are even more challenges regarding price and value.

Since the two courses are somewhere in the middle of the pack when it comes to pricing, staff members must keep a watchful eye on the type of experience that's being created for golfers. And, there's no question that maintenance operations play a significant role. The ongoing challenge is to discover creative ways to maintain the courses while shaving expenses to preserve a favorable bottom line. Yet, as these Naperville Park District courses discovered in 2008, this is easier said than done.

Both of the district's courses are operated as an Enterprise Fund, which means no tax dollars are used to support the facilities, and all operations and capital improvements are funded through golf-related purchases. When the golf market was on a roll, revenue easily funded all operational aspects, while an adequate fund balance helped guard against revenue shortfalls. However, as the economy slowed, the fund balance continued to shrink.
"This was a real wake-up call for us," explains Kevin Carlson, Superintendent of golf grounds. "We knew something needed to change—and quickly."

**A Long, Hard Look At Operations**

The first step in the reevaluation process was to bring in a consultant in spring 2009 to conduct a 100-day study of both courses. The goal was to have a set of actionable recommendations. Several initiatives were completed as part of the process, including a market analysis of the Naperville area, developing a strategic plan, and reviewing maintenance practices. The discoveries made provided the operations staff with a blueprint of how to help both courses regain financial footing in a market that theoretically was designed to favor the profitability of golf courses.

Everything from staffing levels to maintenance practices to management philosophies and methods was scrutinized. Interestingly, it wasn’t only one or two major changes that needed to be made in order to have a meaningful impact. Rather, a list of small- to medium-sized recommendations was made for a significant impact. In the final analysis, both Springbrook and Naperbrook made several changes, which included staff restructuring, reworking maintenance schedules, bringing some maintenance initiatives back in-house, and making minor enhancements to facilities.

Most notably, the input received from the consultant helped to provide some leverage to get capital projects and course renovations approved. Here are some of the highlights:

- **Repairing and maintaining 120 golf carts and servicing all mowers and equipment.** Staff members adjusted and implemented a preventative-maintenance program to keep costs down and extend the lifespan of equipment. They discovered extending the life of the golf carts from five years to six saved several thousand dollars a year.

- **Changing driving-range maintenance practices.** Previous maintenance and mowing schedules forced the driving ranges to close early Sunday and Monday evenings. However, with some changes, the ranges at both courses now remain open every evening until dark through Labor Day. This change significantly increased the availability of the ranges during peak evening times.

- **Modifying turf care.** Limiting irrigation improved turf quality and enhanced playing conditions while conserving resources as well as budget dollars. Minimizing water use also allowed stronger and more desirable turf species to thrive while crowding out the less desirable Poa Annua.

- **Changing labor practices.** Simple changes in golf-course maintenance practices and training staff members to handle more than one task cut the workforce by one-third on weekends. The changes also resulted in a significant reduction in overtime hours without a noticeable difference in golf-course conditions.

- **Helping with in-house creativity.** Seasonal work is not the only area that can have an impact on the budget. A preemptive measure—dog decoys—helped minimize course damage in the off-season. These plywood dogs mounted on stakes and placed throughout the courses helped ward off geese. Naperbrook Golf Course, in particular, is plagued with hundreds of resident geese that remain on the course through the winter. With limited food available, the geese tend to eat and dig up any turf not covered by snow. By spring, not only have goose droppings created a noticeable mess, but there’s significant damage...
to repair. "Sooner or later, the geese tend to figure it out," Carlson explains. "However, the decoys have been shown to minimize the damage, which helps in the long run."

Still looking for efficiencies. In 2010, with little change to the economic climate, the need to minimize expenses is still a relevant pursuit. As a result, both courses are continuing to look for ways to cut costs. For instance, tree removal—when necessary—is being handled by maintenance staff while bulk purchasing with other city departments and tracking maintenance hours continues to increase. Details as seemingly minor as adding sand to the bunkers and removing weedy brush around the course ponds are important. And, although many of these tasks are accomplished behind the scenes, each contributes to the overall experience, and helps create a cumulative positive effect that complements the other aspects of the courses' operations.

Every golf course hopes for the perfect combination of price, experience and weather to bring golfers through its doors, but every year it takes more "fight" to make that happen. "Keeping your eyes on the details really does have an impact in the end," Carlson explains. "The market's just not like it used to be. The lesson is that these days, success comes by chipping away little by little."  

Kevin Carlson is the Superintendent of Golf Grounds, and oversees maintenance at both Naperville Park District courses. He can be reached via e-mail at kcarlson@napervilleparks.org.

Sameera Luthman has been the Director of Marketing for the Naperville Park District since 2001. He can be reached via e-mail at sluthman@napervilleparks.org.

To comment on this article, log on to www.parksandrecbusiness.com