

Revisiting Golf Course Maintenance Costs

Reducing Golf Course Maintenance Costs

Many golf clubs within New Zealand are struggling for financial survival. This is as a consequence of rapidly rising costs for course maintenance coupled with at best, static membership levels and hence revenue streams. Unfortunately, it is likely that income will reduce further given the difficult economic times we now face and the effect that that this will have on the discretionary spending of consumers.

Where the economic “sustainability” of your golf club is under threat, serious attention needs to be turned to expenditure and this may require extremely radical action. Elimination of some of the “excesses” of golf course construction and maintenance seem to be inevitable if course maintenance costs are to be reigned in.

Golf Course Maintenance Expenditure

The expenditure on golf course maintenance can be broken down into three major items, namely:

- Labour
- Consumables (fuel, fertilisers, pesticides, etc)
- Capital expenditure (i.e. machinery replacement).

Labour

There are many 18 hole golf courses in New Zealand that are presented to a remarkably high standard using one or two full time staff. This is achieved by:

- Minimising growth rates so that the amount of mowing required is also kept to a minimum
- Concentrating labour input in the key playing areas – the course may look a little “rough around the edges” but the game can be played and enjoyed as it was intended.
- Having realistic golfing expectations and avoiding today’s obsessive requirement for maintaining a pristine and perfectly groomed environment.

Clubs need to:

Firstly focus their resources on what is really important and set realistic standards for each of the playing areas on the golf course – in other words prepare a Policy Document. The playing areas on a golf course and their suggested order of importance is:

- Greens
- Green aprons and approaches
- Fairways
- Tees
- Primary rough
- Secondary rough/out of play areas
- Bunkers/hazards
- Trees
- Gardens

Secondly, slow the growth of the turf down so that much less mowing is required. This will produce nothing but benefits – reduced cost to grow the grass, reduced cost to mow the grass and for the most part, improved playing conditions.

Presentation of golf course with less resource input

A consequence of reducing staffing levels and maintenance inputs is that the presentation of the golf course will probably (inevitably) need to change. This should be communicated to the members via Course Policy document, newsletters, meetings, etc so that they understand how and why things will change.

Concentrating on the key playing areas will ensure that the game itself can still be enjoyed as it always was. If there is a real passion for some of the “niceties” around the edges such as gardens, perhaps the thing to do would be to hand that task back to the members. In other words, encourage voluntary labour to carry out nice-to-have but not essential maintenance.



Both of these golf courses will enable golfers to enjoy the game of golf. However, perfection (LHS) has a large cost.

Voluntary labour may be a way forward for many clubs. While this has fallen away in recent years, necessity may see it increase again. Other changes may also influence this – for example, people are living longer and more healthily following retirement and in truth many of these people are looking for things to do with their time.

Consumables

Reducing inputs will in turn reduce growth rates and hence mowing requirements. Essentially the requirement here is to clearly understand exactly how much growth is required to cope with the wear to which the golf course is subjected and reduce inputs to that level. While this sounds simple, it is often a painful process to go through.

A good analogy would be an obese person. The so called obesity epidemic is caused by too much input (too much food) and not enough outputs (exercise/activity). Many of our golf courses are “obese” because they are over fertilized and over watered. Consequently they require additional mowing, topdressing and renovation.



Above: An example of “obese” turf.

While reducing inputs sounds easy in theory it is not necessarily easy in practice and some pain may need to be encountered along the way. Key requirements will include:

- Accurately determining and being fully aware of the level of inputs required.
- Making change gradually within a managed environment.
- Communication with members.
- Committed golf course maintenance staff.

The aim is to get back to minimal inputs and then avoid the temptation to start ratcheting up even though it may become affordable.

Water requirements

In many parts of New Zealand, provided that the right grasses are present, the only areas that really require irrigation are the greens, the surrounds and perhaps the tees. If a healthy, deep rooted sward of the correct perennial grasses is present, the lack of irrigation generally does not result in an unplayable golf course during the dry months. It might be very “sporty” (i.e. hard and bouncy), but the playing conditions can be better than adequate. Players need to accept this situation and in some very dry years, conditions may be far from ideal. Clearly this approach will minimise the amount of water that needs to be used and hence the associated issues (costs) that irrigation creates.

High quality management

The Committee/Board should set policy and standards that it is then up to the Golf Course Superintendent to implement. Clear standards coupled with careful, intuitive and knowledgeable green keeping will reduce the cost of maintenance by avoiding unnecessary excess whilst optimising playing quality given the resources available. Everyone involved should constantly be asking “Do we really need it?” and “Is there a cheaper option?”.

Give the Turf a Chance



Over planted green creating both shade issues and largely redundant bunkers.

Many turf quality problems such as high levels of disease, poor growth or weed invasion are brought about by trees. In this situation you can either spend money on fungicide, additional fertiliser, additional labour (to rake up leaves and storm debris) or you can remove some trees to minimise these problems. Essentially you need to do everything you can to optimise the growing environment for the desired grasses and in so doing minimise maintenance problems such as disease. Note also that excessively planted areas of rough take a lot longer to mow than areas with only a few trees.

Reduce the Maintained Area



Clearly one of the challenges facing many golf clubs is the expectation by members for the entire golf course to be prepared weekly as they would their own lawn. Players may need to learn to accept a slightly more “unkempt” or natural look that is a consequence of retiring areas from maintenance. Reducing the maintained area and concentrating resources in the key playing areas will reduce costs.

Machinery Choices

The challenge for clubs when purchasing machinery is to get the balance right, namely:

- Achieve the standard of playing quality required.
- Capital cost for machinery.
- Efficiency of machinery (ha mown/hour).
- Maintenance costs for the machinery.

Funding from Gaming Trusts and the like has made it easier for clubs to purchase machinery (and for that matter other consumables) “above their level” only to discover too late, the reduced mowing efficiency, higher maintenance costs or difficulty of meeting annual depreciation requirements (machinery replacement) for their machine(s).

The answer with machinery for golf clubs that are financially challenged may be to turn back the clock. For example:

Changing to hand mowing greens will have benefits in terms of reduced costs to buy and maintain the machinery, reduced fuel usage, improved turf quality and health benefits for those doing the mowing. The problem with walk-behind mowing is that it is more time consuming. However, if we slow down the growth of the grass as discussed previously, a reduced frequency of mowing will be possible without a reduction in turf quality. Hence the overall amount of man hours required may be no different.

Or

Dispensing with dedicated fairway and rough mowers that are more expensive to purchase, maintain and run. Instead, revert back to trailed gang mowers towed by small tractors. These are generally quicker and cheaper to run. The drawback is that some relatively trivial aspects of turf quality will not be as good. For example, you can not achieve that really vivid, striped mowing pattern now the norm on many New Zealand golf courses.

Or

Forget about mechanised bunker rakes – the golfers can rake the bunkers!

Other points to consider are:

- If growth rates are reduced to the suitable minimum, machinery will last a lot longer and hence the ongoing replacement cost will be reduced significantly. For example, if you mow three times a week rather than six or seven times a week, mowers will last twice as long.
- Reduce the number of trees in the rough so that mowing the rough takes less time and can be completed successfully with a set of trailed gangs.

Reintroduce livestock!

There are some great livestock grazed golf courses in New Zealand and in the UK. If you have a genuine passion for the game you would much rather play on a sheep grazed golf course than not at all. Note that the resort courses at Cape Kidnappers, Kauri Cliffs and Kinloch use livestock on occasion to “mow” some parts of the golf course.

Through the use of livestock, the cost to maintain a golf course can be reduced to a minimum. With only the greens and surrounds maintained with walk behind mowers and everything else “mown” by sheep, the resource use would be minimal. Note: The sheep should also generate some income. While you might laugh at this prospect, it may ultimately be an option that some clubs have to consider for survival.



Summary

If golf clubs are to live within their financial means, they need to focus on what is really important and concentrate resources there. Reducing inputs to slow growth to a suitable minimum will produce multiple benefits. In some situations, radical action may be required, which will result in significant changes to the way golf courses are presented. But provided there is a genuine passion for the game, the enjoyment of it will not be diminished.

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