SUCCESSFUL RENOVATIONS

inside
KEYS TO SUCCESS  TALKING COST  HARD SELL

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SUCCESSFUL RENOVATIONS

KEYS TO SUCCESS

MULTIPLE PARTIES HAVE MAJOR STAKES IN A RENOVATION PROJECT. A SUPERINTENDENT FACES A DELICATE BALANCE ENSURING EVERYONE’S NEEDS ARE MET.

BY RICK WOELFEL
A renovation is a significant event at any golf facility. Whether the project involves a redesign of the entire golf course, rebuilding two or three greens or anything in between, it’s a major undertaking, one that will leave a lasting impact.

A successful renovation project involves a collaboration among the club’s members/customers, its golf and greens staffs and the architectural firm that actually does the work. All have a stake in the project, and all have concerns that will need to be addressed.

DOS AND DON'TS
A renovation effort may require a year or more to complete, but preparations begin well before the construction crew arrives on site.

B.J. Parker has spent a decade as the superintendent at Brentwood Country Club in Brentwood, Tenn. The golf course, which was built around an old plantation house, dates back to 1955. It has undergone a number of changes since then. The club recently completed a redesign of two holes and a renovation of its practice facilities under the supervision of architect Todd Jester.

Parker says when embarking on a renovation, it's important a club to choose its architect with care. “You want to find an architect that shares the same vision as the club and its members, and can provide the type of look and feel that you want to accomplish,” he says. “You want an architect that will listen not only to the members in focus groups, but also the club staff to understand the vision, get it on paper and then transfer that to the course and grounds.”

Cutler Robinson is the director of golf course operations at Bayville Golf Club in Virginia Beach, Va. He calls choosing the architect “the most critical decision when it comes to the success of a golf course renovation project.”

“The right architect will result in the right contractor and right budget, and best long-term result,” Robinson says. “Not just the result that looks good upon completion, but a result that has golfers wanting to play for years down the road.”

The finished product should also be practical to maintain once the architect and construction crew have departed. Prior to the most recent work at his club, Parker made an effort to stay in close touch with the key decision-makers, so that any potential issues could be resolved while the project was still a series of architectural drawings.

“I made sure I knew every little detail about what was going on,” he says. “What was being done, what was being communicated, if it could or couldn’t be done. That was the biggest thing for me that I was in the loop as much as possible.

“If you look at what the architect has designed and get his vision of what it’s going to look like, you can convey what’s possible and what’s not possible from a maintenance standpoint. That’s huge. If it’s something that’s going to be difficult to maintain or something different from what you’re doing, that can create a whole set of challenges.”

BY THE NUMBERS

2015 Capital Improvement Budget (projected) $105,154

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<th>Spending Focus</th>
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<td>Greens renovation</td>
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Source: GCI research

*Other” responses included tee building, erosion control, practice areas, pond installation and course conditioning.
SUCCESSFUL RENOVATIONS

FINDING THE RIGHT FIT
Just as a corporate lawyer should not be retained as a criminal defense attorney, every architect is not a fit for every job. If a club is considering hiring a particular architect, the members and superintendent should study their previous work to gain a sense of their design philosophy from both an aesthetic and a practical standpoint. “They should get a sense of how the architect’s work holds up over time.” Robinson says.

If a club is embarking on a restoration with the intention of restoring the original look of its presumably older golf course, it should retain an architect who is familiar with the work of the original designer. But it’s also important the superintendent has that knowledge.

Royal Colwood Golf and Country Club in Victoria, British Columbia, opened in 1913. Around 2001, the club hired architect Wayne Carlton to develop a master plan in an effort to restore the Arthur Vernon Macan design to the way it looked in the late 1920s and ‘30s. Carlton and superintendent Donald Singlehurst worked off old photos and notes and minutes of club meetings. These resources are invaluable when planning a restoration effort. Unfortunately, some clubs do a better job of archiving their history than others.

PLANNING TIME
Prior to the start of construction, it’s vital that the superintendent and architect develop a plan for moving equipment and materials into and off the property. “This can be the most challenging aspect, of the project, especially if you try to stay open and operating in some capacity,” Parker says. “We created a staging area in the parking lot for all the materials and communicated that to the membership. We were able to stage most of the equipment needed for the renovations on the course.”

Once the work gets underway, it’s important the interested parties maintain open lines of communication with each other.

“Communication is the foundation of how successful a project will be,” Robinson says. “It goes along with trust and the ability for all parties to be forthright with ideas and concerns.”

The project architect should take the lead in these discussions. The club, after all, is hiring him for his expertise.

“The architect really needs to lead the creative process,” Robinson says. “The superintendent needs to be able express concerns openly and they need to be addressed in a timely manner. That can only happen when communication is at its best. But the architect and shaper are artists. They need space and time to allow for the creative process to be fully realized.”

The architect, contractor and superintendent will be working closely throughout the project. It’s important that superintendent be the voice of the club and have the unequivocal support of the membership from the start.

“The architect and contractor need to know they cannot go over superintendent’s head” Robinson says. “The superintendent needs to have full support of green committee and board, before the project begins.”

Stuck in the middle
It’s no secret a renovation project will generate a lot of interest from a club’s membership.

Regardless of the scope of the endeavor, the members are likely to express strong opinions on the matter, both for and against. With that in mind, here are some suggestions for superintendents who seek to avoid getting caught in the middle of the debate.

Be conservative in estimating how long the project will take to complete
As any superintendent knows all too well, the best-laid plans can go awry.

“Renovations can be fluid, and what happens from day-to-day can change,” says B.J. Parker, superintendent at Brentwood Country Club in Brentwood, Tenn. “So we constantly communicated with the membership about what was going on and what issues they would be dealing with on a daily basis. Throughout most of our renovation, we had two holes closed and several others that played differently based on what was going on that day.”

Provide updates through official channels
By far the most effective way to disseminate information to members about an ongoing renovation is through the club newsletter, or perhaps by posting notices on the club’s website or in the locker rooms. It’s best to avoid offering tidbits to members on a one-on-one basis, unless you’re speaking with the club president or greens chair. Otherwise, you’ll soon have a small group of members who believe they are ‘In the Know’ and privy to inside information. From a superintendent’s point of view, very little good can come of that.

Don’t neglect other turf-care issues while the renovation is in progress
“I think this is common in the renovation process,” Parker says. “Fortunately, I was able to see things that needed to be fixed or addressed along the way or that could benefit us down the road and implement those ideas or changes. It takes communication to get the word out, but while you’re making improvements, you might as well address areas that need to be fixed or repaired that may have been that way for a while.”

When the golf course is closed, it is closed to all
Offering sneak previews to certain members creates ill will and slows down the progress of the work.

Don’t hide possible cost overruns or delays from membership
Delays during a renovation are almost inevitable. And if certain budget items exceed cost estimates, it’s best to be up front about why and how much.

Do not criticize the architect or contractor to each other or the membership
If the superintendent has a concern with the architect or contractor, he or she should speak to them directly.
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CONVERSING ABOUT COST
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UP-FRONT DISCUSSIONS WITH MEMBERS CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE WHEN TRYING TO GET A COURSE RENOVATION PROJECT APPROVED.

BY RICK WOELFEL

Some are of the opinion that the most challenging element of a golf course renovation is merely deciding to go ahead and do one. Renovations do not occur in a vacuum. Virtually every aspect of club life is affected during a renovation effort. Members may be without all or part of their golf course, in some cases, for a year or more. Access to other club facilities may be restricted. And the cost is not insignificant.

The idea of a renovation or restoration is almost sure to generate a spirited debate within the membership of a club, particularly at a member-owned facility.

Proponents will argue that a redesigned golf course will attract new members or visitors and could perhaps lead to the club hosting a major tournament. If other clubs in the area have recently upgraded, there will be those who will contend that an upgrade is necessary to keep up with the neighbors.

Skeptics will argue, often quite vociferously, that the cost and disruption of a renovation will outweigh any benefit. That position will often be taken by older members who may be preparing to leave the club and are reluctant to spend money on a project they will personally derive no benefit from.

All of this is why so many golf facilities often hesitate to embark on major projects. It’s fair to say the overwhelming majority of clubs won’t shy away from projects that are necessary. But members, greens chairs and boards of directors want to be assured their dollars are being spent wisely.

Paul Drobbin is the president of Hollywood Golf Club in Deal, N.J., which recently hosted the 53rd USGA Senior Women’s Amateur championship. The golf course opened in 1918 and has undergone a number of changes. The most recent change was a bunker renovation completed this past spring. The renovation wasn’t a condition for hosting the Senior Women’s Amateur, but Drobbin says the members felt it was a necessary step.

“About five or six years ago, the membership decided that the bunkering was the weakest part of the golf course,” Drobbin says. “We looked at the bunkers and decided they were not up to the same standard as everything else so the membership said, ‘We need to do something about the bunkers.’”

In addition to the revamped bunkers, the project included the installation of a state-of-the-art drainage system and some tree removal. In this particular instance, generating member support for the project did not prove particularly difficult. But that’s not always the case.

CATER TO ALL GENERATIONS

Often the divide forms along generational lines, with younger members with a long-term stake in the club opting to press...
on and older members expressing reluctance. But Drobbin is quick to point out the reverse can be true as well. "Somebody like myself who’s been here for 28 years is more emotionally attached to the club than somebody who’s here for three or four years," he says. "That’s only natural. "The challenge overall is for golf courses these days is the emotional attachment that is required to keep members. (Golf) is an expensive hobby and oftentimes it isn’t the last to go off people’s hobby list. It may be the first to go, so golfers need the emotional attachment."

As to actually financing a project, proven methods include borrowing the necessary funds from a bank and/or a member assessment.

"Certainly the members have to pay for it one way or another," Drobbin says. "Whether you go to a bank and borrow the money or you ask the members for an assessment or a combination of both … It depends on the strength of the membership and the value of the land. Our membership has been very stable the last six years or so, so if we went to a bank to borrow some money, I don’t think there would be a problem. Every project is different, so it’s important the members share an investment in what’s out there, fiscally and emotionally."

The key to gaining member support for any sort of upgrade is providing accurate and comprehensive information about the scope of a project. Members at a private club want to be sure their dollars are being spent wisely and don’t want to be caught unaware.

Cutler Robinson, the director of golf course operations at Bayville Golf Club in Virginia Beach, Va., says members need to know up front the project’s length, cost and impact on activity at the club, and whether the course will be closed. Robinson says it’s imperative to explain how this downtime or lost revenue is ultimately going to pay itself back."

Hayman says members and customers often end up as the driving forces behind a renovation.

"Every project is different, so it’s important the members share an investment in what’s out there, fiscally and emotionally."

—Paul Drobbin, president, Hollywood Golf Club in Deal, N.J.

"The people that are in charge of these clubs are businesspeople. They’re retired people. They don’t necessarily speak agronomy. They speak business, they understand the business world. So you have to speak to them in a language that is palpable for them and then if you have logic, then you can have success."

It’s important to be up front about whether all or part of the course will need to be closed during, and if so, for how long. In the case of a private facility, the golf staff will often set up a series of reciprocal arrangements with nearby clubs so members have places to play golf during the work.

At a resort or daily-fee facility, the situation is more complex. Hayman’s facility, for instance, is open 365 days a year. Closing the course simply isn’t an option. The only exception to that policy occurred shortly after he arrived in 2009 when an outbreak of bacterial wilt destroyed several greens, leaving a golf course that simply wasn’t playable. To avoid inconveniencing guests, Hayman says it’s vital for all parties involved in a renovation to develop and stick to a plan.

"The important thing when you’re staying open is to get out in front of (the work), to meet daily with your pro shop, to have your executives on board with the plan, and have everybody singing the same harmony," he says. "You don’t want to be all over the golf course with equipment, you want to keep it confined to one area. On a typical day, a hole-and-a-half would be affected. If we were working on the half of the hole closest to the tee, we would move the tees up and modify the hole into a par three or par four. Or vice versa, if they were working in the green complex, half of the hole we would make a temporary green and modify the hole."

The resort would offer special events and discounts on days that work was in progress and provide return passes to golfers who were interested.

This brings to mind the issue of integrity. If it’s necessary to close a hole, or utilize temporary greens, golfers making a tee time or booking an outing should be made aware of that fact by phone or online before arriving at the course.

Nothing will undermine a course’s reputation more quickly than withholding this kind of information. If a group discovers that a portion of the golf course is closed and wasn’t notified of the situation before it teed off, those golfers won’t be back, and neither will their golfing friends and business associates.
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