

# In-House Projects

Don't bite off more than you can chew to save a buck or two.

BY TODD LOWE



*Projects like building new tees should only be undertaken by the staff if they have the resources to do a quality job and if it won't compromise the care and conditioning of the rest of the golf course.*

**G**olf courses change with time and, to improve turf health and playing conditions or simply to modernize or change the look of certain features, renovation is necessary. Infrastructure items such as buildings, irrigation systems, cart paths, and bridges do not last forever, either, and must also be upgraded or replaced eventually. Much like a house requires new carpet, a fresh coat of paint, or a new roof, so too does a golf course require periodic renovations.

Do-it-yourself home improvement projects can certainly save money. The same is true for golf facilities, as it is oftentimes less expensive to have the grounds crew perform improvement

projects as compared to hiring outside contractors.

Golf facilities operate with limited funds, and superintendents will often try to assist their facilities by performing projects in-house. This would include minor remodeling projects, some irrigation upgrades, and drainage improvements. Not only does this save the golf facility money, it also provides the crew with a temporary break from routine maintenance operations. However, there can be downsides to in-house projects, and it is important to be aware of potential pitfalls.

First, it is important to consider the size of the work and the number of projects. Remember, the primary

responsibility of the maintenance staff is to maintain the golf course at a particular standard. Turfgrasses, weeds, trees, and landscape vegetation grow continually, especially during the summer when most improvement projects take place in winter golf destination areas in southern regions of the U.S. Every maintenance task requires a certain amount of time to complete. Depending on the frequency of each particular task, which could be daily, the time needed for routine maintenance and course setup really adds up each week and month. Maintenance tasks like mowing, weeding, edging, trimming, landscaping, and bunker maintenance (just to name a few)



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require a considerable amount of labor, and most golf facilities have just enough staff to provide the desired level of course conditioning.

When labor is stretched too thin, something has to give. That “something” oftentimes is the amount of detail work or level of course conditioning when certain maintenance tasks must be temporarily eliminated or performed less frequently. Even a relatively simple renovation or construction project can require significant time from the staff. When golf facilities take on too many extracurricular activities in the form of special projects, it is easy to fall behind on maintenance programs and subsequently struggle to provide desired course conditions for daily play. An easy fix to this problem, as

many would assume, is to simply adjust golfer expectations downward until all special project work is complete, but this is not realistic for most memberships or golfers. Instead, make certain you are adequately staffed before taking on additional projects. If needed, hire additional temporary labor to perform menial tasks or consider outsourcing some maintenance practices until project work is complete.

Routine practices like mowing, weeding, or bunker maintenance may fall behind slightly, but make certain that important cultural practices like thatch management (core aeration, sand topdressing, deep verticutting) or soil remediation (the incorporation of sand or amendments into the soil) are not sacrificed for the sake of in-house

projects. Such practices are essential, and deferring them can take a toll on turf performance and playability for years to come.

Second, make sure you have the particular skillset and tools for the project. While building new features or remodeling existing ones may seem like fun and simple tasks, they will become burdens and sources of frustration if the staff lacks the skillset or tools necessary to do the job efficiently or effectively. If a quality finished product is not the end result, then it means disappointment for everyone involved. One of the most common examples of in-house projects gone wrong is remodeling or building new teeing grounds. Although this project seems fairly straightforward, building good tees is harder than most realize. When not done well, tees may end up being misaligned, having slopes too steep for riding mowers, and having poor irrigation coverage or uneven surfaces. This is an example of when it is difficult to match the expertise of an experienced contractor with proper tools for earthwork, drainage, surface leveling, etc.

The economic downturn in recent years has resulted in a dramatic reduction in new course construction. In response, golf course builders have reduced their costs considerably and are much more likely to take on smaller renovation projects than ever before. In some cases, it may make more sense to hire an experienced builder for an entire project or use one in combination with your grounds crew.

We all must consider cutting costs where appropriate, but when it comes to course enhancement or renovation projects, do not get in over your head. Plan accordingly for the size and scope of the work. If it cannot be done in-house, or if there are concerns that the work may not be done well or will be at the expense of the rest of the golf course, then consider handing the project over to an experienced contractor. For more information on this topic, please refer to [Perils and Pluses of “In-House” Renovations](#).

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