

# Don't Make Promises You Should Not Keep!

*Establishing realistic timelines for project completion can be crucial for long-term success.*

by DARIN S. BEVARD

**C**ONSIDER THIS: a new golf course is under construction; fairway grass conversion is scheduled for the fall; putting green renovation will begin in July. All are very important projects with one thing in common — the need for a deadline for opening or reopening.

In traveling the Mid-Atlantic Region of the USGA Green Section, I have had the opportunity to work with many different construction projects. I am amazed how often the timeline provided for opening or reopening is not only unrealistic, but offers a true opportunity to jeopardize the success of a major investment in the facility in the interest of gaining a small amount of additional playing time or revenue. Playability may be poor and the turfgrass is not ready to receive traffic, yet getting people out on the golf course is the priority, regardless of turf performance. Moreover, many times the opening date is established by someone with no working knowledge of turfgrass management! The decision is often arbitrary, without consideration for the potential condition of the turf at the time of opening.

When setting a timeline for opening a golf course after renovation or construction, there are several important issues to keep in mind to determine whether or not the promised opening date is in the best long-term interest of the golf course.

As the opening date approaches, the appearance of the grass on the surface can betray the true maturity of the turf, especially on putting greens. A newly constructed putting green will look traffic-worthy on the surface before it can actually tolerate the rigors of everyday maintenance and golfer traffic. Root and thatch development must also be considered.

Should the course open May 1 or May 15? What difference can two weeks make? The answer is *plenty* — if growing days are counted instead of calendar days.

In the Mid-Atlantic Region, it seems that most projects are completed between the middle of September and early October. Assuming an October 15 germination date, that leaves maybe 30 days of reasonable growing weather prior to winter. In the spring, another 30 days of good weather from April 1 to May 1 can be expected. While some development certainly occurs over the winter months, it is often minimal, especially under harsh weather conditions. On May 1, the greens are approximately 60 growing days old. On May 15, the greens are roughly 75 growing days in age. That two weeks provides 25% more time for turf development. That time can be crucial for sod strength and thatch development. This layer of organic matter is what cushions the turf from traffic.

When a course opens following construction or renovation, traffic will be heavy. There is no such thing as a “soft opening.” Excitement over a new layout or relief at being able to return to the course after a long closure brings players out in droves. Additionally, if any reciprocal agreements were made with other courses when the course was closed, those chips will be cashed in as well. Fine turf areas must be ready when they are opened.

So what if there is a little bit of turf damage? Turf loss on a collar here, some damage on the front edge of the green there. A little seed and top-dressing and everything is just fine. Not exactly. First of all, gaining recovery on fine turfgrass under regular play and maintenance is difficult. Secondly, there are issues unrelated to turf. For

private clubs, getting approval for renovations is often politically sensitive. When renovated areas are less than perfect, naysayers will label the project a failure. Approval for future improvements can become even more difficult to obtain. For public facilities, poor turf conditions can lead to rumors of dead greens and poor playing conditions. This negative publicity can do irreparable damage to a course's reputation, leading to a loss in revenue and prestige.

How do you set a deadline? Make sure the decision makers are well informed and qualified to do so. Talk to the golf course or construction superintendent in detail. After all, the golf course superintendent will shoulder the blame for declining turf and be left to pick up the pieces if damage occurs after an early opening. While it is good to have a projection for the length of closure, weather and other delays can impact the best-laid plans.

What is the bottom line? Do not determine exact dates until after renovations are complete and turf grow-in commences. This will provide a better opportunity to evaluate progress, allowing a realistic schedule to be developed. Everyone wants to reopen from renovations and construction as soon as possible. However, damage to the course's turf and reputation can occur after a premature opening. All things considered, don't make promises that you shouldn't keep! Maintain a flexible schedule in the short term to preserve quality and project success for the long term.

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