

Stretching the Budget

By Rich Moffitt

No matter what your facility or how extensive the area under your control, there will always be a need to stretch the budget.

While some facilities may not be coping with actual budget cuts, the size of the area to be maintained may have expanded, or the level of maintenance escalated, or both. Doing more with less is a fact of life for the sports turf manager.

Know What You Need

The first step in stretching the budget is identifying what is really needed — and what isn't needed.

Continue to hone your record-keeping, which is an essential component to budgeting. Document what takes place on each area under your maintenance program, when and by whom. Track the number of mowings with which piece of equipment, who operated the machine and how long it took. Note how much of what type of fertilizer was applied when and by whom. Record which areas were aerated, with which equipment, when and by whom, and pertinent details on core removal and topdressing. Maintain the same degree of detail in tracking seeding, irrigation, weed, fungus and insect control procedures.

Include in your records any factors, such as unusual weather conditions or extended field use, which might have a positive or negative impact on the effectiveness of the procedures.

Keep a daily, weekly and monthly log of expenditures, including equipment, material and labor allocations.

Analyze the current usage and maintenance programs of each field, other turf and landscape areas, and the buildings, walkways, parking lots and other hardscape features under

your care. Prioritize the allocation of resource dollars, materials and labor according to the maintenance requirements necessary to achieve the desired quality level based on area usage and the expectations of the users and facility owners.

For sports fields, the safety and playability of the area are top priority. Aesthetics come in second.

Work to Shave Costs

Examine each step of your maintenance program with an eye toward shaving costs. For example, base fertilization programs on soil test analysis to keep nutrients at optimum levels without applying unnecessary materials. Block out areas with persistent weed, insect or disease problems and seek cultural maintenance alternatives to keep those problems in check



with fewer control product applications. Where heavy-use athletic areas require repeated repair and renovation, explore options in scheduling of practices and games on other sections of the field, or on other fields.

Consider all possible cost-saving alternatives. If you have adequate storage space, or your supplier is willing to arrange split shipments, can you trim purchase costs by placing one annual order for fertilizer, seed, or herbicides, rather than ordering materials on an as-needed basis? Can you earn volume discounts by combining your orders with those of other departments or other local facilities?

Have you explored new market introductions? Would a change in products extend the period between applications, or a switch to a combination product eliminate an application?

How efficiently are you using your equipment and labor resources? Can you hire outside labor and specialized equipment to perform certain procedures more cost effectively than tackling them with your existing staff and equipment? Also explore the cost differential when using your staff for the pre-procedure preparation steps and the post-procedure clean-up stages when using a contracted service.

Routine Maintenance - Materials (Line Item XX)												
Field Name _____						Location _____						
EXPENDITURES												
Item Description	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
Fertilizer												
Pre-emergent Herbicide												
Post-emergent Herbicide												
Non-selective Herbicide												
Fungicide												
Insecticide												
Grass Seed												
Sod												
Topsoil												
Leaf Compost												
Clay												
Calcined Clay												
Bark Mulch												
Miscellaneous Horticultural Supplies												
Equipment Parts												

This form can be used to track monthly expenditures of a single line-item — in this case, materials for a specific field.

Routine Materials (Line Item XX)

Proposed Budget 1995	Actual Expenditures 1995	Proposed Budget 1996	Actual Expenditures 1996	Proposed Budget 1997	Expenditures Year-to-Date February 1997	% of Budget 1997

This form gives a quick overview of current expenditures in comparison with previous years' expenditures. This is set up for an individual line-item. Total expenditures could also be tracked using a similar form.

Hunt for Resources

Consider long-term maintenance needs as well as up-front costs during major renovation or building projects. There frequently is greater flexibility in project budgets, which are viewed as one-time costs, than in daily operating budgets. Specific equipment can be included in project budgets for use during the construction and grow-in periods. It's a bonus for you and your facility when this same equipment has been planned to improve maintenance procedures once the field is established.

Many project budgets also are flexible enough to cover material costs for the first season. This "cushion" allows you to work the special needs of the new or improved area into your overall budget during its second season of use.

When facing extensive budget cuts, prepare a thorough breakdown of the facts and figures and provide your supervisors with an open evaluation of what can be accomplished. In some instances, funds from other areas can be temporarily diverted to maintain certain areas at, or near, previous levels to satisfy needs and meet expectations. In some instances of severe, across-the-board budget cuts there will be no room for negotiation. Your superiors will need to know just what realistically can be expected.

When you've fine-tuned your maintenance and budget program internally, look for external solutions.

Communication and cooperation are key factors in stretching the budget. There will be other entities within your facility with similar, and perhaps somewhat overlapping, responsibilities with whom you can share resources if you each understand what the other must accomplish and you keep the channels of communication open.

This may include lending some of your staff during cleanup following a wind storm or heavy snow in ex-

change for some field preparation assistance in the spring. You may "share" a piece of equipment that is used for field maintenance tasks, construction projects and general maintenance operations. Specialized tasks, such as equipment maintenance, might be channeled to your personnel, while irrigation or lighting system repair are more effectively handled by the personnel of another entity.

Some departments may have labor sources, such as students in work-study programs, with a lower per-hour cost than your full-time staff. These individuals may be available for special projects or during specific

periods when their efforts could accomplish a great deal under the supervision of your regular staff.

Your facility will have multiple groups with a vested interest in the condition of the areas you maintain. Seek their cooperation, and when possible, their funding.

Risk management departments and those individuals involved in your facility's safety program will constantly be reviewing all aspects of the facility and setting standards which must be met. If you can assess and document changes which will improve the overall condition of the facility and its position in areas of safety and liability, and help you meet or exceed the new standards, the costs involved in making those changes may be available through capital improvement or special project budgets.

For school systems, interest groups include the entire athletic department, all the coaches and players, and the booster clubs. For municipalities and parks and recreation departments, each user group and its supporters are possible resources.

Any of these people can spearhead a fund-raising drive for specific equip-

continued on page 18

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Stretching the Budget

continued from page 17

ment or materials — if you let them know what you need and why you need it in terms of what it will accomplish for them.

Those who aren't able to contribute funds may be willing and able to pitch in with hands-on assistance. People like to help when they know what to

do and why it matters. Every hour of non-skilled labor that works toward your goals is a crew-member hour you have to invest where it's most needed.

Look to other community entities as well. There's no reason a public or private school system, college or university, parks department and public or private golf course can't work together in meeting certain goals.

Each has wide areas of turf with certain basic and other more specialized needs. Sharing specialized equipment and trained technicians can trim costs and increase efficiency for all involved.

Area businesses and service organizations also may be a resource for funding, material donations, labor, or all three. Put together a needs list for specific fields that user groups can circulate. A local nursery or garden center or a garden club might consider planting and maintaining the flower beds for the entrance to your facility, or for a specific field or park area. A local business or civic group might fund new bases for a tournament, a section of new fencing, a couple new soccer goals, or the fertilizer or grass seed for a specific field.

Businesses and sponsoring organizations can be thanked with a small insert in the sports program, a thank-you letter to the local newspaper, signs posted on the fence or scoreboard, or near the entrance, or any combination of these.

Stretching the budget means adopting a "Scrooge" mentality, at least temporarily. Plan ahead for the worst case scenario, allocating funds, materials and labor with extreme care. Review past records both in terms of action taken and the results produced. Compare current output by line-item to date with past records and factor in differences in weather conditions and area use.

Know your limitations — including what you can cut and what you can't. Strive for perfection, but be realistic in your expectation. Be willing to shift resources when necessary to maintain levels of safety and playability on athletic fields, knowing you'll need to make program alterations in less critical areas. Then, during tight times, just do it to the best of your ability. □

Rich Moffitt holds a BS degree in horticulture from the University of Missouri at Columbia. He's been with Saint Louis University, St. Louis, MO, for ten years and serves as director of Grounds & Materials Management. He's treasurer of the national Sports Turf Managers Association.

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