

COPING

with cutbacks



This is the second installment of the 2010 Ewing Professional Development Series. STMA and Ewing have again partnered to bring sports turf industry professional development and career issues to the forefront. For more information, go to www.STMA.org or www.Ewing1.com.

YOU'RE DOING A GOOD JOB. But your budget is being cut. And you'll have to get by with fewer employees.

That's the message heard by many when the budget axe falls.

Parks departments, school districts and sports organizations around the country are coping with reduced revenues and the prospect of no quick turnaround any time soon.

"Unfortunately, in the current economy we are dealing with a cutback in supplies and personnel, which means decreased frequency and reduced maintenance at any one site," says Mike Tarantino, director of maintenance and operations for the Poway Unified School District in Poway, CA.

So how do you, as professional sports turf managers, meet your primary expectation—well-tended, safe playing fields—when forced to make do with fewer resources?

Your first priority, suggests Steve Wightman, stadium turf manager for Qualcomm Stadium in San Diego, is to...prioritize.

"Fields that support greater usage or are considered to be high-priority fields should receive the greatest resources," Wightman says.

That doesn't just mean less frequent mowing or less watering for lower-priority fields. It may mean less fertilization or forgoing annual aeration, topdressing or overseeding.

And, "there may be areas other than playing fields where reduced maintenance activities can be implemented, such as landscaping or general common areas that carry a lesser degree of expectations," Wightman says.

Setting those priorities can't be a snap judgment. Take time to carefully review field use and create a rating scale to help allocate your resources.

Clearly, game and main practice fields that get the most use require the most attention and probably should be on a daily maintenance schedule.

For lower-priority surfaces, set up a rotating maintenance schedule with the goal of paying closest attention to safety standards by inspecting them at least once or twice a week.

Budget crimps mean that you and your field users may have to sacrifice some aesthetics to devote your available resources to keeping the fields safe and playable.

Budget cuts also mean that you have already faced or will face tough decisions on labor, facility maintenance and equipment costs.

Based on input from seven turf management professionals nationwide, here are some suggestions for coping with cutbacks in each of those three major areas.

To minimize labor costs:

- Set up nontraditional workweeks to minimize overtime by scheduling workers to work longer hours on your busiest days and less time on the less-busy days.

- Stagger employee schedules to cover more hours of the week without overtime.

- Convert full-time employee jobs to part-time, split shift, or seasonal work.

- Carefully evaluate staff performance to make sure you have the most productive people on the job and that they're assigned to work based on their strengths.

- Explore contracting out some labor or functions rather than keeping them in-house.

- Reduce employee benefits. (No one said this is easy or fun.)

- Research the availability of federal grants, such as money from the economic stimulus package.

- Consider using trained, supervised volunteers from team or community groups to handle some landscaping, cleanup, raking, or fundraising to augment your budget.

To reduce maintenance costs:

- Concentrate on trouble spots instead of entire fields.

- Cut back mowing or topdressing schedules.

- Use cultural practices instead of chemicals if that can adequately fix a problem.

- Use less pesticide and fertilizer, still paying attention to label rates so that you get enough bang for the buck.

- Use slow-release instead of quick-release fertilizer and/or reduce the rate of application in low-traffic areas.

- Shop around for products. You might be

surprised that better deals are available.

- Use field paint that contains a plant growth regulator to reduce re-painting time.

- Restrict high-priority field use to cut down on maintenance needs.

- See if you can get lower-priced two-year contracts instead of one-year contracts from outside vendors.

- Be more efficient with your irrigation. Try soil penetrants, evapotranspiration monitors and scheduled run times.

- Review your electric and water use rates and schedule irrigation at off-peak times to reduce utility costs.

To pare equipment costs:

- Look into borrowing from each other. Some parks departments have found they can share equipment with golf courses, for example.

- Cut down on wear and tear by rotating equipment between crews that put on a lot of hours with crews that don't.

- Keep up with routine maintenance to prolong equipment life.

- Look for advertising tradeoffs.

Connie Rudolph, head groundskeeper at Midway Stadium in St. Paul, MN, arranged a tradeoff with a local equipment company. In exchange for advertising the company, Midway is allowed to use a piece of equipment for the season.

The big challenge in implementing any financial cutback is explaining it to the staff and the facility users. Communication with all "stakeholders" is key.

"Their input is critical in helping to determine how limited resources can best be utilized," notes Wightman. "As part of the communication process it's important to stress the direct relationship between required maintenance and safety and liability issues."

In order to make convincing arguments that you need your slice of the budget, you need to understand the big picture. And you need to have your own facts—what costs are associated with each aspect of your work.

Be prepared to justify why a certain piece of equipment or maintenance practice is essential. And be able to explain what the harm would be if it was cut from the budget.

If cuts are essential, work with rather than against the appropriate budget managers to make sure your priorities are heard.

Keep the lines of communication open with your staff so that they're informed about the cuts and understand why they're necessary.

Hold staff meetings and listen to your staff. The front line often produces the best suggestions.

Try to present the situation honestly but with a positive attitude. Your staff will reflect your optimism or pessimism, and that in turn will be reflected in productivity.

Remember, too, that a network of peers is available to you for consultation through the Sports Turf Managers Association.

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