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Strategies for Weathering the Economic Downturn

As sports turf managers, it is our job to produce safe, playable surfaces to our athletes and users. With the struggling economy, most sports turf managers are currently dealing with budget cuts, or have dealt with them sometime in the past few years. This has forced prioritization of fields, maintenance and supply cutbacks and also reduced time allocated to maintaining athletic and recreational surfaces. So how do we provide optimum conditions when dealing with limited resources? Sports turf managers across the United States from various facilities share their strategies on how to handle the effects of the economic recession.

Our Role as Sports Turf Managers

“As turf managers, player and user safety and aesthetics take precedence. In order to maintain playing surfaces at their highest level, sports turf managers must develop a set of standards and expectations. These standards set the bar for goals on what we wish to achieve each season. Unfortunately, in the current economy we are dealing with a cutback in supplies and personnel, which mean decreased frequency and reduced maintenance at any one site. This is where our standards become important. Depending on available supplies, personnel, and expected consequences, we need to readjust our standards. Knowing our available resources and how that will influence a playing surface allows us to make attainable goals.”

— Mike Tarantino (Director of Maintenance and Operations, Poway Unified School District)

Prioritizing Our Fields

“When budgets are being cut, one of the first areas to review is setting priorities on fields and field maintenance. Fields that support greater usage or are considered to be high priority fields should receive the greatest resources. Prioritizing maintenance activities may mean reduced cultural practices such as fertilization and mowing frequency or, reduced renovations such as aeration, topdressing and/or overseeding. Of course, all of these come with reduced short and long term playability and aesthetics. 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.”

— Steve Wightman (Stadium Turf Manager, Qualcomm Stadium)



Figure 1: Crumb Football Field is a high priority use area for the Town of Lexington in Lexington, Massachusetts. It serves as the high school football field, Pop Warner football field, and is the outfield for the JV and Babe Ruth baseball teams. (Picture courtesy of David Pinsonneault, CSFM, CPRP)

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Whether you are maintaining one field or twenty, prioritizing fields helps determine where time, supplies and maintenance should be allocated.

1. Review your entire maintenance program and schedule. Distinguish your high priority areas from low priority areas and try to determine where adjustments can be made in your budget.

- Create a rating scale and evaluate areas to determine where they rate on your priority list so you can allocate the proper amount of time and money to maintain each at its highest level.

2. Game and main practice fields need the most attention.

- Game fields have high visibility and should always be kept in top condition for safety and aesthetics.
- Main practice fields are where athletes spend the majority of their time and need to be kept in safe, playable condition.
- These sites should be visited daily for maintenance practices.

3. Cut back maintenance frequency on low priority fields and other areas.

- Make sure the lower priority fields still meet safety standards.
- Have a rotating maintenance schedule that services these areas at least once or twice a week.
- Reevaluate how much money you want to allocate to maintaining parking and landscaped areas.

4. Reevaluate your budget regularly.

Labor Costs

The biggest expense for a facility is the staff. To help avoid layoffs, here are some ways to redistribute your employees to try and maintain quality and frequency of service to playing surfaces.

1. Split shifts.

2. Implement an innovative work week as an alternative to overtime for hourly employees, or as a means to reduce overtime.

- The work week can start on a different day than the traditional Monday through Friday, and can be different for each employee. For example, if some of your staff's work is typically heavy on

Thursday and Friday, their work week can be a Thursday through Wednesday model. They would work longer hours on Thursday and Friday, but still maintain the 40 hour maximum in a week.

- By staggering your employees throughout the week, you can make certain that all of the maintenance tasks are covered.
- You can also work with your employees to adjust their schedule to be variable, allowing them to work as much as necessary on certain days, as long as their seven-day period does not exceed more than 40 hours.
- These innovative schedules do require the employee and employer to have a written agreement.

3. Change full time positions to seasonal positions.

4. Evaluate each individual and focus their work based on strengths or what they enjoy doing the most.

5. Reduce employee benefits.

6. Make sure staff is well trained.

7. Contract out services.

- Although this still costs money, it may not be as expensive as using in house labor. Contracted services save us from paying hourly wages and benefits. It also allows our staff to focus on other areas while the contracted service is going on.

8. Volunteers

- Recruiting teams, community groups and individuals can help tremendously.
 - Teams can help rake baseball and softball infields.
 - Eagle Scouts can help with projects such as building signs or sheds.
 - Local Garden Clubs can be utilized to care for landscaped areas such as traffic islands. David Pinsonneault, CSFM, Public Grounds Superintendent for City of Lexington, MA, has put an "Adopt a Traffic Island" program into place that local garden clubs take advantage of to showcase their work.

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- Volunteer groups and sports leagues may be able to fundraise for projects, such as field renovation, or for supplies, such as line marking paint.

- Volunteer contributions may prolong the need for major field renovation.
- Be careful as to how much freedom you give volunteers. Their idea of helping may turn into a maintenance nightmare for you.

9. Incentive programs

- As part of the economic stimulus package, some cities receive money from the government that is allocated to the grounds department and used to pay temporary seasonal hires.

Reducing Maintenance Costs

"We aren't developing new ideas on managing fields, everything is the same, we just need to adjust our practices and think outside the box."

— Mike Tarantino (Director of Maintenance and Operations, Poway Unified School District)

Maintenance Practices and Products

- 1. Focus on small trouble spots instead of the entire field.**
- 2. Cut back frequency of cultural practices such as mowing, or topdressing.**
- 3. Try to remedy a problem by using cultural practices before using chemicals.**
- 4. Be more efficient with pesticide and fertilizer applications.**
 - Always follow label rates.
 - Consider spot treatments in areas of concern rather than broad based applications.
 - Reevaluate necessity of application versus preventative application.
 - Use a slow release fertilizer instead of quick release.
 - Reduce rate of fertilizer applications if possible.
 - Reduce the application rate for the entire area. Instead of applying 1 lb. N/1000 square feet, try applying $\frac{3}{4}$ lb. N/1000 square feet.
 - Or reduce the application rate only in lower traffic areas, such as end zones.
 - Determine exact square footage of each area you apply products and buy what is needed

to eliminate excess.

- Shop around. Sometimes less expensive products perform the same as the premium product.

5. Use plant growth regulators.

- Field paint that also contains a plant growth regulator can reduce the number of times a week you need to paint lines on fields.

6. Cut back on field maintenance supplies such as paint, infield skin conditioner, or hand tools.

7. Restrict high priority field use to only necessary uses.

8. See how cost effective it is to sign 2-year contracts instead of 1-year contracts with outside companies or vendors.

9. Be more efficient with irrigation.

- Use of soil penetrants, evapotranspiration monitors and scheduled run times can all help reduce costs.
- Keep track of water dollars. You may not realize how much you are spending just to water your field.
- Review your electric rates and schedule your field irrigation during off-peak hours to reduce your utility costs.



Figure 2: Focus on small trouble spots instead of the entire field. (Picture courtesy of Dr. Norman Hummel)

Equipment

1. Borrow equipment.

- Some facilities have the capability to share equipment between different departments. For example, a parks and recreation facility may be able to share equipment with a local golf course.

2. Depending on the size of you facility, rotate equipment between crews that put on a lot of hours to crews that do not.

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3. Set time aside for equipment maintenance to prolong life.

4. See if you can arrange an advertising trade off.

- Connie Rudolph, CSFM, Head Groundskeeper at Midway Stadium, MN, has arranged a trade off with local equipment companies. In exchange for company advertising, she is allowed the use of a piece of equipment for the season.

Communicating Effectively

“The key element to a successful approach in dealing with reduced budgets is effective communication with your boss, owner and teams. Their input is critical in helping to determine how limited resources can best be utilized. As part of the communication process it’s important to stress the direct relationship between required maintenance and safety and liability issues.”

— Steve Wightman (Stadium Turf Manager, Qualcomm Stadium)

Communication is fundamental to running a successful facility. Communicating our standards, expectations, and priorities helps everyone around us understand our goals and how we plan to attain them. As sports turf managers, it is our goal to build credibility and let superiors know we are professional, responsible, and knowledgeable in our line of work.

1. Be educated about your budget.

- Know where your resources are being allocated and why they are allocated to that area. Know your costs associated with each area.
- Be able to justify why a specific maintenance practice or material is essential if there is the potential for it to be cut out of the budget.
- Be honest when calculating your budget. Determine what you need, how much you need and why you need it to present quality work. Try to see where you can afford to make cuts if the need arises.

2. Always keep lines of communication open between your staff, coaches, administrators, superiors, and peers.

- Consistently communicate your priorities and facility conditions. Keep everyone updated about changes, problems, daily maintenance, weather factors, etc. Educating the people you deal with on a daily basis may make your job easier.

- Hold meetings to outline the upcoming season or year.
- Have staff meetings so your employees understand your expectations.
- Communicate with coaches on what to expect. It is sometimes hard to make these people understand what is happening on the field.
- Have a close working relationship with those that deal directly with the budget.

3. Listen to those around you.

- Staff members often have valid input and ideas.
- Surround yourself with people who can offer ideas.

4. Stay positive. No one wants to be led by a pessimist, and your mood influences everyone around you.

5. Be aware of your mistakes and don’t repeat them. Evaluate your operations and determine how to sustain strengths and improve on weaknesses.

Conclusion

Once the economy hits rock bottom, it will be a slow recovery using tight budgets and thin resources. Therefore, we need to focus on what really adds value to what we do and what is truly essential to make things better and stronger. Times like these call for sports turf managers who can spark innovation, are adaptable and can execute change efficiently. It is important to remember that you are not the only one facing budget cuts, but that you have an extensive network of peers that can be relied upon for support and advice.

Contributors:

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Connie Rudolph, CSFM – Head Groundskeeper at Midway Stadium, St. Paul, MN

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