

Golf Course Master Planning

As golf course superintendents, you have probably contemplated or may have already completed one or more renovation projects at your facility. These may have included drainage improvements, the addition or expansion of a practice facility or the reconstruction of tees, greens or bunkers. No matter how large or how small, it is important going into these projects, that there is a clear understanding of what the long-term vision for the golf course is and how those improvements might affect future improvements and future operations. The process which golf course architects use to clarify that vision is called “long range master planning”.

What is a long range Master Plan?

The long-range master usually consists of a detailed plan and a typewritten narrative summarizing the existing condition of the golf course as well as recommendations for future improvement. We typically start with an aerial photograph and a topographic map of the golf course and then, through a series of site visits and meetings, we summarize the strengths and weakness of each hole on the golf course. We typically look for drainage and maintenance problems, safety problems and problems with pace of play or playability. In some cases, we might also look at opportunities to increase vehicle parking and ways to improve cart staging and circulation around the clubhouse.

Once the analysis has been completed, we then prepare a plan of the golf course showing our recommended improvements. The plan is prepared in full color so that it is suitable for presentations to large groups or for display in the clubhouse to encourage discussion among the membership and guests.

The final phase of the master planning process involves putting together a cost estimate and a phasing schedule for the improvements. This allows the manager, owner or Board to prioritize the specific projects on a hole by hole basis based on cost and other criteria of their choosing.

Why do we need a Master Plan?

The real purpose of the master plan is to provide a long-term vision for making improvements to the golf course and to provide a basis for prioritizing those improvements. We frequently visit with courses that only a year or two earlier put in new cart paths or new irrigation systems only to find that the new tees they now want to build don't work well with those previous improvements. By stepping back and taking a look at the bigger picture, the master plan process often allows the Club to avoid costly mistakes and to save money by phasing projects in a more logical sequence.

Another important benefit of preparing a master plan is to avoid the implementation of “pet projects” or spontaneous projects which often result when new Presidents, Green Committee

Chairs or Board members or are elected. Often times these projects are done with perfectly good intentions but without a complete understanding of the course's long-range priorities.

Implementing your Master Plan.

Once the master planning process is complete, your Club will need to decide which projects are of highest priority. For some courses this is a matter of simply trying to improve turf quality and daily playing conditions. In this case, the Club might decide to focus on drainage issues, tree removal and the installation of cart paths. At other courses, the priority may be improving course playability and strategy by adding tees, rebuilding greens or reconstructing bunkers.

I often recommend that the Club try to select a specific hole or specific area of the golf course and then complete all or most of the work in that area at once rather than doing numerous smaller projects such as constructing new tees on three or four different holes. There are a number of reasons for this but most importantly this allows the membership or golfing public to see the new dramatically improved finished project in its entirety rather than just seeing smaller individual projects that might go somewhat unnoticed.

Another reason for this is that these larger more comprehensive projects tend to save money by minimizing disruption to play throughout the golf course and by minimizing money that will need to be spent restoring damaged turf.

Regardless of how you decide to proceed, the master planning process can be a great tool for providing a long-range vision and for prioritizing improvements to your golf course.

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