THE BUSINESS OF GOLF COURSE REMODELING
Jeffrey D. Brauer, ASGCA Past President

All aspects of golf course management are becoming more business oriented with each passing year. This extends to the business of golf course remodeling. Now, more than ever, all decisions pertaining to renovation of an existing golf course are made in a businesslike fashion. Questions such as: Do we need to remodel?; What are our priorities?; Can we afford it?, precede a substantial renovation plan for a golf course.

Occasionally, decisions on remodeling are forced on a club suddenly, such as in the case of a natural disaster or other unplanned events. However, the well-run club, like the well-run business, will have a long-range business plan which anticipates the need for continual replacement and renovation of its facilities to stay current in the marketplace. For your golf course, this plan can be established through the development of a long-term redevelopment plan.

WHEN IS IT TIME TO REMODEL?

Clubs decide to remodel when it becomes apparent to the governing body that deficiencies exist in the structure of the club in one of the following areas:

1. Economic problems
2. Maintenance problems
3. Design problems
4. Aesthetic problems

The above list was listed in decreasing order of importance, according to our experience as golf course architects. A closer look at each area follows:

Economic Problems

Golf clubs, even equity clubs, are marketing a service and a product. Economic problems become evident when it is difficult to raise dues and difficult to attract new members.

Typically in such cases, existing clubs often find that new clubs are offering potential members a better choice. Other local clubs that remodel or renovate have also been upgraded to where the public perceives better value.

It is easy for this type of problem to go unnoticed for several years. This is especially true if substantial money were invested in a renovation seven to ten years ago. Believing that the golf course is “set for life,” other courses slowly catch up until you recognize that you need to act to keep from falling behind.

It’s important to remember that golf courses, your product, need to be continually updated to stay ahead of the marketplace.
A rare situation is case when a golf course must be renovated to better meet the needs of its target market (whether that be membership or public play). This is happening generally as golf’s appeal broadens and more women come into the game. Renovations, including women’s tee programs, should be a part of virtually every club’s long-range plan.

Demographic shifts in an area (such as more senior citizens moving into the area) occasionally necessitate a shift in golf course philosophy. Major changes of operational philosophy, such as converting from public to private or vice versa, also require close study to necessitate sea of design changes are necessitated.

### Maintenance Problems

The next important category that leads to long-term, large-scale renovation problems is the need to correct serious maintenance problems. Typical among these include:

- Deteriorating greens
- Desire for USGA greens
- Need for larger tee surfaces
- Need to eliminate difficult to maintain bunkers
- Need for new irrigation system
- Drainage problems
- Flooding problems
- Cart path extensions

### Design Problems

Occasionally, we are called by a club to create a renovation problem to solve golf course design problems. While less frequent than other types of renovation projects, occasionally without economic transition or serious maintenance problems, the club membership is composed of serious golfers and they desire that the club be updated or be changed, to enhance their golf experience. Typical problems that facilitate golf course renovations include:

- Desire to update design of course
- Desire to make course more difficult/less difficult
- Regional or national tournament
- Rebunkering to accommodate longer tee shots
- Need to revise individual unfair holes
- Restore course for sake of historical accuracy

The nature of the design problems to be corrected is as individualistic as each golf course, club membership or golf course owner.
**Aesthetic Problems**

It is very common to have a golf course that is well built and solid in terms of playability that needs help with aesthetic treatment. The professionally trained eye of a golf course architect (often trained as a landscape architect) can assist a club in improving this important aspect of its course.

Typically, aesthetic problems are created either through inadequate and originally inadequate landscape budget, through improper planting by well meaning, misguided tree planting committee, or other in-house improvements that were simply not carried out well.

Many architects note that a majority of the renovation business comes when a club is making its second major attempt at improvements. While golf course architects and contractors are expensive, it often takes mistakes in the name of saving money for clubs to realize that professional help is necessary.

**RENOVATION PLANNING – THE GOLF COURSE ARCHITECT’S PERSPECTIVE**

When a golf course has identified, however vaguely, one or more of these problem areas needs to be addressed, it’s time to call a golf course architect.

The golf course architect will likely add another perspective on how positive changes to the golf course can solve specific business problems. His/her experience will likely show that proper design solutions can solve problems in more than one area.

For most golf course architects, remodeling work constitutes a significant portion of their business. Almost universally, architects will tell you that it is more challenging than designing a new golf course.

This often stems from the architect being involved in the “go/no go” decision in renovation. At equity clubs, it is typical for the older members to be resistant to change. While they pay an equal share of the cost, they may feel they do not have as many years to enjoy the value of the potential changes. Senior members also typically have many positive memories of their many years at the club, thus making it more difficult to understand why anybody would want to change “their course.” At any golf course and for any member, partial or total disruption of play is difficult to tolerate.

And because most players at a given course have fond memories and an intimate attachment to the golf course, design issues often shift from technical terms to more emotional ones.

Additional challenges for the golf course architect and club manager form expanding their roles to include, communicator politician, negotiator and arbiter!

**DETERMINING THE SCOPE OF WORK**

When called to prepare a golf course redevelopment plan, we recognize that club members have a difficult time visualizing potential golf course changes. Based on second hand information about renovation programs at other clubs, a renovation
committee might have wildly different ideas about what is in store for their club. This is individualistic as the clubs that undertake them.

An experienced golf course architect will tailor the redevelopment plan to build the quality of the existing facility and the long-term goals of the club. Therefore, the renovation plan undertaken at your golf course may be completely different than one undertaken just down the street.

To begin flushing out the types of changes needed on a particular golf course, we begin by reviewing the established goals based on identifying problems as listed earlier. We then inform the membership of the potential remodeling techniques, or program types and how they might be utilized to solve specific problems.

**In the general rule, we classify remodeling programs into three basic types:**

1. Budget-minded improvements
2. Rebuild in place
3. Relocation of major features

Each tends to carry a successfully larger price tag, yet can solve more problems if properly executed. Most renovation problems eventually contain some elements of each. Major relocations, including rerouting golf holes, is relatively rare compared to the other two types of improvements.

**Budget-Minded Improvements**

In one sense, golf courses, through their superintendent, are always pursuing incremental improvements that can be instituted economically. Included in this type of program are:

- Contour fairway mowing
- Contour tee mowing
- Creation of chipping areas through green bank mowing
- Tee extensions
- Green extensions
- Bunker elimination/construction
- Introduction of wildflower areas
- Landscape additions
- Cart path extensions
- Irrigation lake additions
- Minor drainage additions
- Flower beds

Most clubs would benefit by utilizing a golf course architect to assist them, even with the simplest improvements. Most architects will consult on a daily basis to assist in such situations. If a golf course redevelopment plan is being prepared, the golf course
architect will likely include several of these elements, when properly done, can greatly enhance the appeal of the golf course.

**Rebuild In Place**

*This type of remodeling is probably most common.* It is necessary to solve most of the design and maintenance problems that typically arise at a golf course. Provided that the golf course has a sound routing, rebuilding in place can be used to solve design, maintenance and aesthetic problems as they may occur on the course.

Rebuilding elements of the golf course requires a greater commitment from the golf course, as disruption now becomes an issue. If a green or tee is to be rebuilt, that portion of the golf course will remain out of play, not only during construction period, but for a subsequent grow-in period as well. Unless construction is timed perfectly, disruption to the golf course can last for six months to a year.

**Relocation of Major Features**

As mentioned, substantial rerouting of golf holes is relatively rare, if no other reason than its more prohibitive cost. Whereas rebuilding a green can often be done with minimal disruption to surrounding areas, rerouting of fairways requires a much greater degree of infrastructure replacement (irrigation, drainage, etc.) and the cost tends to rise geometrically.

However, the cost is worthwhile if it can allow golf holes to be substantially improved, such as relocating them out of flood prone areas. In other cases, golf holes must be relocated due to loss of land for highway widening. For extreme, longer cases desire exists to relocate a golf hole to improve safety. Many clubs have been able to acquire additional usable land to add to the length of the golf course or add other facilities such as driving range, pool complex, etc. In this case, the relocation of features is an opportunity to overcome long-standing limitations of the existing layout.

Typically, in the preliminary design phase the golf course architect will assess a variety of options, with an analysis of the respective costs for presentation. The club should decide early in the process whether its financial situation, including existing debt, dues structure and other factors will allow it to commit to major elements of the plan the golf course architect may propose. If it cannot, financial realism should be incorporated into the final redevelopment.

**CREATING A PHASING PLAN**

The question of how to prioritize construction improvements involves many variables. Once several basic questions are answered, the direction of the remodeling program will take shape.
The first consideration is one of “how big a piece do you bite off at one time?” There are two basic options, with variations of each:

1. Massive renovations at one time
2. Spread renovation over as long a period as possible; or
3. Combination approach

A summary of each method follows.

**Massive Renovation**

Massive renovation entails closure of the golf course as work progresses. It is often promoted by one of several motivations:

- Course is already closed due to flood, freeze or other damage;
- Immediate need due to flooding, freezing or other problems;
- Desire to see results quickly; or
- Unique opportunity to financing project.

Advantages include lower unit costs for construction due to economy scale, a greater tendency to “do it right” (rather than do makeshift changes to minimize disruption), and avoidance of yearly disruptions to play.

Disadvantage typically include difficulty in providing financing for such a large project, disruption of cash flow in the dining room and pro shop, and the natural fear of driving members away.

**Spreading Renovation Over Period of Several Years**

This is a more typical method to accomplish a renovation of program. Typically, financing is easier because of the smaller nature of each project, and if properly timed, there is little disruption to cash flow. At most clubs, the inconvenience of playing one or two temporary greens will not affect play levels.

Disadvantages include playing a golf course that is inconsistent in style and play value for several years, some resentment of continually tearing up the golf course, and the possibility of changing direction of losing momentum in the program. Maintaining a consistency of materials (greens mix, etc.) may also be difficult, and this can affect play and maintenance practices.

**Combination Approach**

The combination approach accepts some of the advantages and disadvantages of both. It is predicated on the premise that if you are playing 15 holes, you may as well play nine holes (twice if desired) and build nine holes each year. This alleviates some logistics problems in the pro shop and maintains cash flow at the club. The renovation is completed in two years so results are seen relatively quickly. It is also possible to schedule some preparatory and/or recuperative years in this method.
In the preparatory years, it is possible to make minor changes including creation of high
caliber temporary greens. These would be made in an effort to minimize the “down
time” during major reconstruction.

Recuperative years can be spaced into the program to give the members a respite. This is
especially important if maturation is not as rapid when constructing the front nine.

**SETTING PRIORITIES**

Unless review of phasing options indicates that the club should undertake a complete
renovation of the entire 18 holes immediately, it will be necessary to finalize each
course’s specific phasing plan by setting priorities.

Setting priorities for planned improvements typically involves answering several either/or
type questions. Typical choices include the following:

1. **Technical Projects vs. “Visual Projects”**
   Technical includes irrigation; drainage and seedbed improvements that help
   the superintendent improve the overall quality of the golf course. However,
   these improvements are often subtle and therefore not noticed by members
   who may then ask where the money went!

   Visual projects, such as new greens, definitely get more attention. They can
   also solve some technical problems at the same time.

2. **Projects That Impede Play vs. Projects That Leave the Course Open**
   This decision can dovetail with the “preparatory years” scheme. It is also a
   function of politics at the club. Is the temperament to “get our feet wet” or to
   “plunge in?”

   Strong sentiment to do only small projects may indicate lack of general
   support for renovation. Ideally, a larger project that has impact (dramatically
   solving a long-term problem) can be a catalyst to keep the program going.

3. **Large Projects vs. Small Projects**
   The decision is impacted by many of the same factors pointed out above.
   More directly, this can be related to the depth of the overall financial ability of
   a golf course to pay for improvements.

   The golf course architect may offer a perspective to a club on setting
   priorities. The concept of a long-term redevelopment plan is to avoid making
   construction errors, and avoid making them out of sequence. This is
   illustrated by a typical exchange with a club recently. Their most immediate
   perceived problem is the need to extend cart paths. Many members wanted to
   extend the paths immediately even though greens reconstruction was clearly
   on the near horizon. Had I not pointed out that a substantial portion of the
   paths would have to be relocated when greens were enlarged and in some
cases relocated in the near future, the club would have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on work to be torn up two years later.

This example also illustrates the value in setting the long-term design elements of the golf course based on the course’s needs rather than budget. Given that most renovations do not typically need to occur in one year, time can be the ally of any golf course in paying for needed renovations. A golf course should never scale back its renovation plan to something that does not solve a problem because money is not available this year. Rather, it should use its redevelopment plan to adequately set aside funds and provide financing for needed improvements in future years. The key is preparing a workable phasing plan.

Phasing should generally be prioritized on the following principles:

(a) Holes that logically go together in construction. Example: The cut from a new irrigation pond should be used on surrounding holes to keep disruption to a minimum. Keeping cut/fill hauling distances short saves cost; reduces damage to course; and has less effect on play.

(b) Holes most in need of change to increase drainage, safety, or seedbed content.

(c) In general, a hole or area should be completely reworked and then left. Coming back into an area tears up completed work and costs more money.

(d) Areas with the highest impact, or that can affect the most holes, should be done first. Areas which make only cosmetic changes or affect only one hole can be done last.

(e) Within each phase, certain priorities are interchangeable, as are some phases.

COSTING STUDIES

After the basic goals have been established, design solutions prepared and prioritization and phasing plans complete, it is important to put a realistic cost study together to complete a realistic long-term golf course redevelopment plan. If all elements have been realistically assessed earlier in the process, the cost study should contain no surprises. Occasionally, an analysis of costs can send the entire plan back to the “drawing board.” As with renovation design, cost estimating for renovations is more of a challenge for the golf course architect. The golf course architect typically keeps old bids on file for a wide variety of projects. In new course construction, recent bids can be updated for inflation and other specific changes in scope of work to provide a reasonable accurate estimate.
The Remodeling Process

In renovation projects, the variables are bigger and problems of estimating become more of a challenge. For example, contractor’s unit costs typically rise as the scope of work is reduced, as is typical in renovation projects. As the contractor applies overhead to smaller amounts of work, this is because the contractor has certain fixed overhead on a weekly/monthly basis, which must be spread out over fewer work items. This must be accounted for on any cost estimate.

Other factors include the golf course’s ability to carry out certain elements of the work and timing of the work, which is often pushed to the fall season to avoid major tournament schedules. Lastly, the architect must account for yearly inflation for long-term projects.

**DOCUMENTATION OF PROCESS**

As can be seen from above, the long-term development planning is actually a process rather than a final product. At the same time, the golf course architect typically will deliver documentation of the final plan, with all elements completed, and backup report, including prioritization plans, phasing plans, cost estimates and other memos and opinions related to the master planning process.

Most golf courses find that the formal documentation of a long-term redevelopment plan is helpful in legitimizing the plan. Many equity clubs include the master as part of its by-laws, thereby preventing whimsical or non-conformance changes for future greens committees. If properly documented, a well-prepared master plan can assist in this effort. A well thought out master plan will contain some flexibility. This is particularly necessary in the case of a golf course that chooses to extend its redevelopment program over a period of several years. Flexibility can be built in by providing a variety of projects with a variety of budgets that the golf course can select, based on its financial condition in any given year.
The final redevelopment plan documentation can serve as a road map to the future for the club that sticks to its goal and objectives. It is important to note that further services will probably be required from your golf course architect at the time of implementation. The master plan is not a bid document or set of construction drawings. Typically, the golf course architect is retained again in a more detailed level of design as established for each specific feature, specifications prepared and bids let. Master plans do not typically give detail consideration to exact lines and grades. SOMETHING out of dimension, etc. nor is it practical for them to do so.

**CONCLUSION**

A well-prepared golf course redevelopment plan is essential for nearly every golf course that takes a business-like approach to its long-term existence. With proper methodology as established in other areas of business such as goal setting, long-term planning, cash flow analysis, combined with the architect’s unique sense of value engineered design solutions is a valuable asset that would keep any golf course from being caught off guard and unaware that it is falling behind the marketplace.