



An Opportunity to Seize

Sustainability is quite simple in theory. And thanks to a collective change in perspective, it appears the golf industry is primed to turn it into reality.

By Jeff Bollig

For an entity or activity to be sustainable, it must survive. And survival ultimately depends on the natural environment (consumption of natural resources) as well as being recognized as providing significant benefits to society. So, it is logical to assume that if the environment is compromised, then the ability to survive is threatened.

From a business perspective, sustainability is based on balancing the three pillars of people, planet and profit. Prolonged imbalance among the three is a recipe for sustainability's polar opposite – failure or bankruptcy.

"I believe that over the past few years golf facility leaders are beginning to understand what sustainability means for golf," says Sandy Queen, certified golf course superintendent and president of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America.

"They might not always use the specific term, but they now get it that the status quo cannot be maintained. The industry as a whole is in the process of learning what it takes to become sustainable."

Many golf courses have existed in communities for more than 100 years. But times change and so does the climate in which they and other businesses operate. As development has increased, the demand for water has risen and so has the price.

Increased demand for dwindling supplies of fossil fuels has driven up the cost of this raw material. Managing a golf

course under that scenario suddenly becomes more challenging. Raise fees and you are likely to lose customers. Lose too many customers and you go out of business.

Now it's time to consider change to help ensure golf's license to do business and quality of life, including the game.

"Golf facilities for the most part cannot operate as they have in the past," Queen says. "If we are to stay in business, we must have a new recipe. If our raw materials and labor increases in cost, we must balance how much of that is passed onto the consumer and how much we can compensate by saving on expenses.

"The challenge in that comes if you increase costs too much you could lose customers and if you cut expenses too much you lessen the value of the experience and you could lose customers."

The conundrum faced by Queen and his peers is one the industry is addressing through education and communications. GCSAA has developed a number of resources aimed at helping facilities become more sustainable.

The goal is to limit the inputs without having an impact on the quality of conditions. Among the tools available to facilities GCSAA offers on its website (gcsaa.org) are best management practices crafted under the "plan, do, check, act" model that have the potential to save facilities dollars.

“Golf course superintendents are uniquely positioned to lead a facility’s sustainability efforts because they manage the asset – the golf course – with the most opportunity to gain from implementing sustainable practices,” GCSAA Chief Executive Officer Rhett Evans says.

“But for a facility to maximize sustainability, it must be embraced by all functions – golf course, food operations, golf operations, etc. Based on my conversations, I see the desire to make a change. Now it is a matter of determining the best way to do it. The good news there is a growing number of examples that give others a road map of sorts.”

Evans said that sustainability does not mean spending beyond one’s means to improve operations such as energy efficiency, waste recycling, water reduction, etc. The foundation of sustainability is a focus on continual improvement by doing what one can. While he sees facilities making such investments across all functions, he is most intimate with what GCSAA members are doing – and he likes what he is seeing.

“We went to Washington D.C. for National Golf Day in April and I heard our members talk to caucuses and individual lawmakers,” Evans said. “What they and their peers are doing is impressive in terms of minimizing inputs, protecting water quality and reducing pollution.”

Golf’s progress has not been lost on regulatory officials. In an interview with the Golf Channel, Rob Wood, EPA director in the water division, said, “The golf industry has made very significant strides in areas like water and energy conservation and reuse, reduction of areas in turfgrass, preservation of native vegetation, habitat protection, wetlands conservation, recycling wastewater treatment, fertilizer reduction,



GCSAA Class A member Jon Lobenstine, director of agronomy for Montgomery County (Md.) Golf shares best management practices with Democrat Nick Rahall, representative from West Virginia during National Golf Day in April.

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integrated pest management, and storm water runoff management just to name a few.”

Queen says the one area where golf could make the sustainability movement more successful and enduring is with golfers themselves.

For a variety of reasons, golfers have come to equate golf course quality with color and extensive maintenance.

In reality, golf is more enjoyable on firm conditions as opposed to those that are wall-to-wall green through heavy watering and nutrient inputs. And the labor necessary for near-perfect bunkers, edged cart paths, extensive landscaping and the like has little to no impact on the enjoyment of the experience. But those elements do drive up costs. By making demands for such conditions, golfers play a role in threatening the sustainability of facilities.

“As an industry, all participants – from superintendents, to pros, to managers, to owners, to green chairs, to golfers – must engage in discussion and be willing to explore a more sustainable approach to facility management,” Queen says.

“As we become more enlightened, we come to understand the positives outweigh the negatives. But it is only natural to be resistant to change, especially when we perceive it to have negative consequences. I am encouraged because I am starting to see a change in behavior and understanding how the industry can gain strength through a commitment to sustainability. As a result of these conversations, golfers will begin to discover the long-term values of golf courses in a different way.” **BR**

Jeff Bollig is GCSAA Sr. Director of Communications, Golf Course Superintendents Association of America.

Numerous representatives of the golf industry traveled to Washington, D.C., to participate in National Golf Day. The objective: To enhance the positioning of golf in the eyes of our nation’s lawmakers. In stating their case, the founding members of the *We Are Golf Coalition* – the Club Managers Association of America, the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, the National Golf Course Owners Association and the PGA of America – collaborated on the creation of principles of sustainability. The statements, while not being exhaustive, are meant to serve as a guide for those professionals who manage golf facilities.

Shared Principles of Sustainability

The *We Are Golf Coalition* is committed to advancing sustainability. We continue to manage and conserve resources and inputs, and reduce waste while providing quality playing conditions for golfers. We embrace a sustainable business philosophy by integrating environmental stewardship, community benefits and economic viability as a critical and ongoing goal.

Ongoing efforts:

- Continual improvement in the design, development, construction and management of golf courses
- Provide ecological and economic benefits to communities
- Provide important green space benefits
- Use natural resources efficiently
- Support ongoing research to scientifically establish new and better ways to design, construct and manage golf courses in harmony with the environment
- Promote more widespread implementation of environmentally sound golf
- Educate golfers to promote the value of environmentally sound golf courses.

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Spring Island Before Green Was Cool!

Special to BoardRoom magazine

‘Going Green’ isn’t really a term that’s applicable to a place that has pretty much been “green before green was cool.”

Spring Island is a pristine 3,000-acre nature preserve and private golf-residential community in the heart of South Carolina’s fabled Lowcountry. As a community woven carefully into a landscape of breathtaking natural beauty, it is more than the sum of its parts. The rich agricultural, natural and outdoor lifestyle that has been a part of Spring Island for several centuries continues today.

Sustainability – Triple Bottom Line *People, Planet, Profit*

By Jeff Bollig

THERE USED TO BE A TIME WHEN PRODUCTS LABELED AS “ENVIRONMENTALLY-FRIENDLY” CARRIED WITH THEM A PRICE TAG MUCH HIGHER THAN COMPARABLE PRODUCTS THAT DID NOT APPEAL TO A PERSON’S INNER TREE HUGGER.

For some, the perception that being “green” costs more; “green” might be a key factor in holding clubs back from implementing practices that foster a sustainable approach to golf course management. But being sustainable is anything but about spending more money just for the sake of being called “socially responsible.”

“Sustainability is about the triple bottom line – people, planet, profit,” says *Dan Dinelli, certified golf course superintendent at North Shore Country Club in Glenview, Ill.* “Sustainable efforts are those that capitalize on efficiency, which in the long run reduce costs. You cannot spend beyond your means and be sustainable.”

Dinelli has received numerous awards for his environmental efforts at North Shore, but contends what he and the club are doing are not unique, nor overly difficult. He said superintendents are by nature focused on sustainability because the concept is rooted in the efficient use of resources.



TOM NOYES
GENERAL MANAGER
SPRING ISLAND

Driving onto Spring Island, a person could easily wonder if they, perhaps, were lost. This isn't a place that looks inhabited, much less by people who have had a modicum of success in their lives.

"People who choose the Spring Island lifestyle cannot give it mere lip service," explained Tom Noyes, CCM CCE, Spring Island's general manager.

"It takes a real commitment to the lifestyle and a passion for nature to live here. No street lights, no mail service at your home, most of the roads are unpaved and you take your own garbage and recycling to one of two collection centers on the island."

None of the parking lots on Spring Island are paved. There are more naturalists on staff than chefs, more employees who work outdoors, than in.

Rather than architectural review committee, it is Habitat Review Board. The focus here is more on maintaining the nature curtain between homes and the road and making sure a homeowner doesn't cut out any more plant material than is reasonable to build their home and/or outbuildings.

Home sites on Spring Island are not cleared, until and unless a home is to be built and is located on the lot.

Every native plant is valued on Spring Island. Once a footprint is staked for a new home, member volunteers go in and rescue the native plants and either transplant them or take them back to the native plant nursery for propagation and future use or sale.

Twice a year, people come from surrounding communities to buy Spring Islands' native plants, the money going towards stewardship and educational programs.

Animals are treated almost as well as plants at Spring Island. Food plots are planted throughout the island for the benefit of birds, bees, butterflies, turkey, deer and even humans. The sesame field is very popular, as is the sweet grass, grown specifically for members and artisans to use for weaving baskets.

Members, staff and the club's chefs have up to 10 different crops to choose from, depending upon the season.

A recent look at the fields finds squash, tomatoes, corn, peppers or beets.

"You can't get any greener than to grow food within a mile or two of where it is being consumed," explained general manager Noyes.



PAGE 22: NO. 17 OLD TABBY LINKS

PAGE 23: NATIVE PLANT NURSERY. MEMBERS PROPAGATE ALL PLANTS ON THE ISLAND

Fishing and birding are ways of life for many Spring Islanders, as are horseback riding, cycling and hiking. There are over 35 miles of trails on the island and about 32 ponds, many capable of producing a world class fishing experience.

Members, or one of the islands two fishing captains, frequently take their catch of the day to Chef Tony for preparation in one of the club's kitchens.

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"Enacting sustainable practices is an exercise in understanding the needs and opportunities of a club, then working with the resources to execute. For example, consider what you are doing with landscaping projects. Determine what alternatives exist that might be more hardy to the area and require less water," Dinelli suggested.

"Out of play areas might provide an option to use hardy native species that require less water, minimal, if any, nutrients and less maintenance. In both of these cases you use less water, less energy to deliver the water, less manpower to maintain the plants and fewer resources to maintain the area. And, you improve the environment without negatively impacting playing conditions. This is a sustainable approach."

Dinelli says the key for club leaders is to work with the golf course superintendent to properly communicate to the membership the aspects of a sustainable approach to golf course management. Namely, what is the impact on the golf

experience (people), the environment (planet) and the bottom line (profit)?

Living by the mantra that life by the inch is a cinch and by the yard is hard, Dinelli encourages facilities to start small. In fact, many of the practices utilized by golf course superintendents are daily 'best management' practices.

Clippings collected for compost and recycling of leaves can have a profound effect on the bottom line. Muskoka Lakes Golf & Country Club, Port Carling, Ontario, Canada measured the costs/benefits associated with a composting program. It spent \$757 in labor and equipment.

The value of composting material purchased was calculated at \$8,518 and the cost to remove the materials, if it had not been composted would have been \$4,327. The bottom line savings was more than \$12,000.

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“You have to have some means to be able to live here but this is not the place for the showy type,” one resident remarked. Have as nice a home as you want – parcel sizes go up to 25 acres – but by rule, nobody can see your home from the road.

In addition, the management of the land includes:

- Prescribed burns to clear out underbrush.
- Waste from the equestrian operation can be spread on fields as natural fertilizer
- The water treatment plant on the island distributes 100 percent of its effluent water back to the golf course irrigation system.
- Wood for all of the club and cottage fireplaces is cut and split by the staff, from trees, which fall on the island.
- Members purchase firewood from the same supply.
- A contractor comes on island and grind limbs and trimmings to produce mulch twice a year. This greatly reduces the amount of money and fuel spent hauling products on and off the island.

“No question,” says Noyes, “the future members of clubs will be asking to ‘see your green.’ Today that might mean the smart shopper wants to know about the club’s finances and viability.

“Fifteen years ago, we didn’t normally show member prospects the club bylaws, much less an audit report or balance sheet.

“The member of the future is going to be asking about our carbon footprint, LEEDS certifications and how we balance between what we take from our environment against what we give back.

“I’ve talked for years about being able to grow food, compost waste and grind our own trees, and one of the reasons I chose to come to Spring Island is that, short of installing our own windmills, I believe we have an unlimited opportunity to be as “green” as any club or community in the country.” **BR**



TOP: SPRING PLANTING AT SPRING ISLAND; SQUASH, BEETS, TOMATOES AND PEPPERS

BOTTOM: WALKER LANDING - SPRING ISLAND’S RIVER HOUSE, NATURE CENTER SPORTS COMPLEX AND EQUESTRIAN CENTER.

WHAT’S THE GREENEST THINGS ABOUT US?

When the Spring Island management team participated in a poll, “What is the greenest thing about us?” the responses varied but the theme was consistent:

1. The members’ garden across from the barn as well as the fields that Johnny plants with fresh vegetables for members to enjoy.
2. Preservation of green space – in the form of nature preserves, nature curtains, and marsh buffers. Land management to promote biodiversity – using prescribed fire, timed mowing, thinning, etc. to promote maximum species diversity and increase habitat for species that are uncommon; native plant preservation and propagation.
3. Minimization of impervious surfaces – only one paved road, low-density development with limit to sq footage minimizing home footprint, and no paved parking lots.
4. Minimal nighttime lighting of outdoor spaces.
5. Nature first, being proactive, getting people outside (amenities and programs) raises awareness.
6. Not so over-the-top homes. Keeping up with the Jones’s is not top priority for most SI members.
7. Reduction of homes from 5000 to 500/ later to 410. The island was initially permitted for 5,000 homes. Our developers lowered it to 500 when they set aside 1,000 acres for the nature preserve. The members later voted the density down to 400 home sites.
8. Creation of Spring Island Trust and Nature Preserve.
9. The recycling, the use of native plans, the vegetable garden, which would be ‘cool’ to see that turn into more of a “Spring Island Farmer’s Market.”

Greg Lyman, director of environmental programs for the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA) points to water use as a means to become more sustainable. With costs rising for the resource and the means to distribute it, facilities are facing difficult decisions.

“We, as consumers have become so enamored by the color green when it comes to golf. And a green, lush golf course is beautiful to the eye,” Lyman says. “But color does not necessarily equate with an improved playing experience.

“Superintendents know that overwatering creates a surface that is not as firm and thus reduces ball roll. It can also make the turf more susceptible to disease, not to mention the associated costs of watering. I encourage clubs to have the superintendent involved in the conversation as to what being sustainable means from a practical perspective.”

Lyman points to Pinehurst No. 2 as an example of how a course can reduce water inputs and provide a more enjoyable experience for the golfer. At the GCSAA Education Conference earlier this year, Pinehurst certified golf course superintendent Bob Farren, architect Bill Coore, USGA executive director Mike Davis and Golfweek senior writer Brad Klein conducted a panel discussion of how the renovation of the course is more sustainable.

By changing fairways, adjusting irrigation, adding low maintenance waste bunkers and utilizing native grasses, Pinehurst will present a playing surface that is firmer, has wider fairways and lack deep, penal rough. Golfers will have more options to play a particular hole than in the past.

“The USGA will play back-to-back men’s and women’s U.S. Open Championships at Pinehurst No. 2 in 2014,” Lyman said. “It will provide a platform to demonstrate how a more efficient watering program can provide a better playing experience. The feedback from the golfers has been extremely positive.

“Not every golf facility has the resources of a Pinehurst, but the principles can be applied to almost every facility. What Pinehurst representatives have said is ‘we want a firm playing surface with the understanding that we will reduce maintained turf.’ The focus is on how the course plays, not how it looks.”

Dinelli and Lyman point out the sustainability efforts within the management of the golf course, every aspect of facility management has a role in developing part of an overall plan. For example, opportunities for energy and water savings are available in the club house, pro shop, non-golf course grounds and other areas.

“People can sometimes feel this is a daunting task, become overwhelmed and don’t know where to start.” Lyman added. “But sustainability is about continuous improvement and doing what you can within your means.

“The key is to look at what you are doing already, building upon it, and creating an attitude among all at the club so the concept is embraced and executed.” **BR**



GCSAA CERTIFIED GOLF COURSE SUPERINTENDENT DAN DINELLI USES VEGETATIVE BUFFER STRIPS AROUND PONDS AT NORTH SHORE COUNTRY CLUB IN GLENVIEW, ILL TO ENSURE WATER QUALITY AND ENHANCE HABITAT.