



Budget Season

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Photo provided by Matty Rodrigue, London Hunt Club.

START WITH A LOOK BACK

Every fall, golf course superintendents are faced with one of the most important, yet often least celebrated, aspects of the job: preparing the annual operating budget. Unlike mowing greens or setting pins, budgeting isn't something that produces immediate visual results. However, the work behind the numbers determines the resources, staff, and tools available to deliver the golfer experience everyone expects.

A superintendent's budget is more than just a spreadsheet—it's a tool for communicating the needs of the department. It's the document that explains to club leadership what it truly costs to deliver quality playing conditions, why those costs are rising, and how each dollar ties directly to the golfer's experience. A clear, well-prepared budget builds trust and sets the course up for success in the year ahead.

So, as budgeting season arrives, here are a few strategies, tools, and practical advice to make the process

smoother and more effective. The first step in building next year's budget is understanding where the money went this year. A year-over-year comparison highlights not just overspending, but also underutilization of certain line items. If you budgeted \$25,000 for fuel but only spent \$18,000, is that due to cheaper fuel prices, newer more efficient equipment or a change in management practices? Did labour overtime exceed expectations due to heat or extended droughts?

By analyzing historical performance, you begin the process with credibility. Leadership can see that your numbers aren't guesses—they're grounded in reality. It also can help you identify trends. For example:

- Labour costs: Have wages risen due to minimum wage increases or the need to remain competitive with neighbouring clubs?
- Chemicals and fertilizers: Are costs rising due to supply chain issues, or raw material costs?

- Utilities: Did hydro costs spike in a hot, dry summer?

Framing the budget around both past performance and future needs makes your case stronger and easier to defend when questions arise in the process. Without these periodic closures, turf conditions can deteriorate rapidly, leading to poor playing surfaces, increased disease pressure, and costly long-term repairs.

ANTICIPATE QUESTIONS

Labour is usually the largest line item, and leadership may ask if seasonal workers, overtime, or full-time staff can be reduced. This is where tying staffing directly to golfer expectations can be helpful in explaining the needs.

CAN WE CUT THIS LINE ITEM WITHOUT AFFECTING CONDITIONS?

Many budgets often go through rounds of trimming. Having a clear "priority list" makes it easier to show what's essential versus what's flexible. Remembering what the

golfer experience you are aiming for is.

WHY DO COSTS FLUCTUATE YEAR TO YEAR?

Weather is often the biggest driver. A cool, wet spring carries with it certain demands that differ from a cool dry spring potentially affecting fungicide costs. A hot, dry summer may spike labour costs due to the longer hours required.

By preparing answers ahead of time, you not only defend your budget but also demonstrate professionalism and foresight.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES TO USE

The superintendent's job has evolved far beyond paper and pencil. Today, a mix of digital tools, benchmarking data, and vendor insights help build budgets that are both accurate and defensible.

Historical Records: Maintenance logs, spray sheets, invoices, weather data, etc. are invaluable. They tell the story of why certain costs were higher or lower in each year.

- Spreadsheets and Budget Software: Whether your club uses Excel or digital job boards that track statistics, organizing this information is key to explaining it clearly to those in charge of the final decisions. Breaking these costs down by category makes for easier discussion.
- Benchmarking Data: Resources like the OGSA Compensation & Benefits report give you a sense of what similar clubs may be budgeting.
- Vendor support: Reaching out and asking your chemical, fertilizer, and equipment representatives for projected price increases can aid in creating a more accurate outlook on your budget.
- Maintenance Standards Documents: If your club has agreed-upon standards (e.g., mowing heights, frequency of bunker raking, green speeds, etc.), align the budget directly with these expectations.

TIPS FOR SMOOTHER BUDGETING

Over time, most superintendents develop a system that works for them. Here are several strategies that can make the process less stressful and more effective:

- Starting Early - Don't wait until the week before the deadline to start. Begin pulling numbers months ahead of the deadline. This gives you time to refine, fact-check, and anticipate questions.
- Build a Narrative - Numbers alone don't tell the whole story. Framing your budget in terms of the golfer experience can help when explaining your budget.

- Prioritize Transparency: Break down where every dollar goes. Show that 60-70% of the budget is labor, 15-20% is materials, and the rest is equipment, utilities, and contingencies. Transparency builds trust.
- Use Visuals - Graphs and charts go a long way. Show a pie chart of labor vs. supplies. Present a year-over-year line graph of chemical prices. Visuals make complex data digestible for non-turf professionals.
- Plan Contingencies - Budgets are living documents. Weather extremes, equipment breakdowns, or disease outbreaks can throw even the best plans off course. Including a contingency line item provides flexibility.
- Communicate Proactively - Anticipate questions and address them in the budget itself. If chemical prices are up 15%, add a note explaining why. If staff wages are increasing, cite competitive wage surveys. By answering questions before they're asked, you show a greater competence of the process.

BEYOND THE NUMBERS: ADVOCACY AND EDUCATION

Budget meetings provide a platform to explain:

- Why labour shortages mean some tasks must be prioritized over others.
- Why preventive fungicide programs are cheaper and more effective than curative ones.



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By framing the budget as a conversation about expectations and outcomes—not just costs—you position yourself as a professional manager, not just “the groundskeeper.”


Budgeting season will never be the most exciting or glamorous part of a superintendent's job, but it may be one of the most important. A well-prepared budget ensures you have the resources to meet member expectations, protect the course, and lead your team effectively. Approach the process with data, transparency, and confidence. Start with history, anticipate the big questions, leverage the right tools, and frame your numbers with a clear narrative tied to the golfer experience.

In the end, budgets aren't just about dollars and cents—they're about aligning the superintendent's agronomic expertise with the club's vision for the golfer experience. Done right, your budget isn't just a financial document. It's a roadmap for success in the season ahead. ■

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