

# 2004 RUTGERS Turfgrass Proceedings



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# **2004 RUTGERS TURFGRASS PROCEEDINGS**

**of the**

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The Rutgers Turfgrass Proceedings is published yearly by the Rutgers Center for Turfgrass Science, Rutgers Cooperative Extension, and the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, Cook College, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey in cooperation with the New Jersey Turfgrass Association. The purpose of this document is to provide a forum for the dissemination of information and the exchange of ideas and knowledge. The proceedings provide turfgrass managers, research scientists, extension specialists, and industry personnel with opportunities to communicate with co-workers. Through this forum, these professionals also reach a more general audience, which includes the public.

This publication includes lecture notes of papers presented at the 2004 New Jersey Turfgrass Expo. Publication of these lectures provides a readily available source of information covering a wide range of topics and includes technical and popular presentations of importance to the turfgrass industry.

This proceedings also includes research papers that contain original research findings and reviews of selected subjects in turfgrass science. These papers are presented primarily to facilitate the timely dissemination of original turfgrass research for use by the turfgrass industry.

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Dr. Ann Brooks Gould, Editor  
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# MASTER PLANS: THE DOs AND DON'Ts FOR MEMBERSHIP APPROVAL

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What is it they say about real estate? The keys to success are location, location, and location. Similarly, there are three keys to any successful membership vote. They are *good communication, good communication, and good communication.*

Just in the last 3 years I've been a part of three such votes: a successful golf course master plan, a successful facility master plan, and a painful failure - a new irrigation proposal that was shot down by an overwhelming majority of the membership. Communication played a huge role in the approvals and the defeat. In this article I will share with you some of the lessons I learned the hard way so that your future plans are successful the first time around.

I'm going to relate my experiences in a chronological order, so let's start with the failed irrigation system.

I was somewhat surprised one evening in the summer of 1999 when a casual conversation I had with my chairman turned into his strong support for a new irrigation system. Just prior to a board meeting he told me that the Board would be discussing long term capital requirements that night, so he asked me what one capital item would be the most necessary over the next 3 to 5 years. I immediately told him that we needed a new irrigation system. He asked why, so I explained the basics of our single row system and how the efficiency of distribution would be greatly enhanced by a three or five-row system. By the time I had arrived at the office the next morning I had an e-mail telling me that the Board had given its approval for the design of a new system and that we now had to sell the need to the membership for a February 2000 vote and a fall 2000 installation.

I quickly researched designers and then asked Jim Barrett to join our team. He recommended a comparison letter from him condemning the current system and how a new system would better suit our needs. This turned out to be the first of several mistakes. We all assumed that since the membership had never voted down any major assessment, we were a lock for membership approval with only a minimum of information filtered down to the members. The letter from Barrett was used only as a tool to further convince the Board of the need for a new system. The membership never saw any recommendations from outside consultants.

We did, however, draft a two-page letter detailing all of the reasons why a new system was necessary. It carefully explained all the reasons for our proposal and included several color photos to give it a professional look. At this point we felt confident in the vote. Unfortunately, most people were unable to get past the first sentence of our letter. It read:

*"Based on the recommendation of the greens and grounds committee, the Board of Directors has approved the installation of a new state-of-the-art irrigation system."*

Due to our poor choice of words, the proposal was dead the day this letter arrived in the mailboxes of our members. I've never seen such a backlash from our membership. "Who do they think they are? They can't approve a project with such large financial implications. Only the members can approve such a request." Despite several letters to clarify the Board's position, we were slaughtered at the polls. We only received 41% of the vote. If we had only taken the time to communicate correctly at the outset...

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Nonetheless, I wasn't ready to give up the fight. The year 2000 brought with it a new chairman who believed strongly in the need for the new system. Recognizing the previous problems communicating with the membership, we set up four focus group meetings in 2000 to do three things: to explain the inherent need for the system, discuss the financial implications, and permit the membership to ask questions and comment on the proposal. This last part was clearly the most important. The membership made it clear that the inherent need for the system was not nearly as big an issue to them as was how the proposal was presented to them, especially since they were never given the opportunity to give any feedback. After so much positive feedback from the focus groups, we thought we were ready to go forward, but some other events at the club forced us to put the irrigation system on the back burner.

At the same time as the irrigation debacle, the Board had begun to look at other issues on the course and approved the development of a master plan for the entire golf course.

We hired noted golf course architect Gil Hanse, and he began his work immediately. At the same time, we sat down with 4 groups of 25 members each to discuss what they would like to see done on the golf course. We took down every comment and then asked Gil to incorporate any idea he thought necessary. Obviously, we knew Gil was only going to do what he wanted to do, but to include the membership in the process went a long way in the eventual approval of the program. Following Gil's final recommendations, every member was given a color copy of Gil's plan.

The next step was the town hall meeting. The president provided the background, the treasurer talked about finances, and Gil talked about the plan. Finally, and most importantly, we gave the members the time to have their say. One recurring comment was that the cost of the project was too high. Based on this and other comments, the Board then came out with their "Board Recommended Projects." A few items were taken out of the plan, most notably the bunker restoration, which would now be financed over time out of the operating budget instead of all at once by an assessment. The original \$2.1 million price tag was down to \$1 million and the vote passed by a huge majority.

Shortly after the approval of the golf course master plan, my chairman, who orchestrated the golf

course vote, became president and was now evaluating other needs for the club. Obviously we needed to close the deal with the irrigation system, but we also had several infrastructure problems. Two of the five greens and grounds buildings were on the verge of falling down, the clubhouse was neither functional nor up to date in décor, technology, storage, etc., and the entrance road drive needed a major upgrade. Certainly knowing that good communication was the key to our previous success, the president quickly mobilized his troops and began a PR blitz that included an entire blizzard of information to the membership.

First, was the hiring of a clubhouse consultant firm. The first thing the firm did was to put together a detailed survey requesting preferences on everything imaginable concerning the clubhouse, greens and grounds complex, the irrigation system, and financing.

While we were getting the results of the survey tabulated, the report of existing conditions came out. This was a stroke of genius. The consulting firm put together a report that described all of the problems with infrastructure. They described how the kitchen floor was about to fall into the basement, how the maintenance facility was unable to support our needs, etc., etc.

Following that, the consulting firm and the Board started cranking. What they came up with was nothing short of spectacular. Although the Board knew that we were never going to do it all, letting out that the proposed plan would cost in excess of \$23 million actually worked to the Board's advantage. When the Board came in with a softer proposal, they were everyone's heroes.

The next step was to hold more focus group meetings. Again, 4 groups of 25, divided by age group, were invited to attend specific meetings. The president served as MC of the event and introduced several speakers, the first of whom was the president of consulting company. He covered the results of the survey, the existing conditions report, their vision for our future, and finally a list of the Board recommended projects. Those projects totaled \$7 million out of the original \$23 million.

Next, came my chairman. Something he said during those meetings will always stick with me. He very forcefully stated that no one in the room outside of the superintendent and David Oatis of the USGA has the technical knowledge to say whether we do or

do not need another irrigation system, whether or not it would be three-row or five-row, Rain Bird or Toro, etc., etc. I had been expecting several questions with regard to these types of things but they never happened, and I believe that his opening statements diffused a lot of that. My chairman then introduced David Oatis who gave a 20-minute tutorial titled "irrigation 101." Now I could have easily given this presentation, and we actually talked about me doing it. However, having an outsider recommend it, especially with the initials USGA on his lapel, certainly lent a level of comfort to the membership that I just couldn't provide.

Finally, David Oatis, the president of the consulting firm, the treasurer, and I sat up front for a Q&A session. I quickly became very confident when there seemed to be more comments than questions. It appeared that our message was getting through, because many of the comments were about why we were not doing more.

Following the Q&A session, another survey was passed out to the focus group participants. Although the results looked good, we were not taking any chances with the irrigation system.

Between the focus group meetings in July 2003 and the final vote in September 2003, my chairman and I hosted an irrigation night on the golf course. I turned on the sprinklers and showed them the limita-

tions of the current system. This won over several converts. Obviously, seeing something first hand versus taking someone's word for it can be very convincing.

At this point the Board had a decision to make: how to structure the vote. Prior to the focus groups, the plan had been to have a one up or down vote on all of the projects. This now seemed risky since we could potentially lose everything, including the irrigation system, for which the polling told us that we had overwhelming support. Ultimately, projects were packaged. The irrigation was put together with the three new greens and grounds buildings. The clubhouse renovation was put together with the entrance road renovation and a club generator.

There was also one final question asked on the ballot. Without tying the hands of future boards, they asked if there was a sense of membership resolution with regards to whether or not future boards should or should not continue with the implementation of the remaining elements of the overall master plan.

In the end, it really was a long process; a lot of meetings, letters, and presentations. However, it paid off. The clubhouse projects passed with 82% approval, the irrigation, greens, and grounds buildings projects with 87% of the vote. Even the continuation of the master plan by future boards passed by a 79% approval rate.