



## “The Golf Fore-um”

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**Our golf course is beginning to show signs of age and we are considering renovations. What are the advantages of a Golf Course Master Plan? (Part one of a two-part column).**

Consider the Master Plan as a blueprint to guide the renovation of your course, just as the original blueprints guided its construction. By doing some thoughtful planning, the project will proceed smoothly and with fewer headaches for the club / facility personnel, greens committee, and golf course superintendent and maintenance staff.

A Master Plan can address a variety of goals and desires for renovation. First, Master Planning can help a facility maintain its competitive edge with other, newer facilities. By updating and refreshing the visual quality of the course, through the addition or redesign of tee boxes, green complexes, and sand bunkers, a course can take on an entirely new character and add strategic playing value. Particularly, those courses designed during the “low maintenance era” of golf course design (for example, post World War II), now look bland or lack character when compared to newer courses.

Second, a Master Plan can address a challenge shared by many existing courses - maintaining poorly located and constructed golf features. Consider for example, sand bunkers that lack sub-drainage, thereby affecting play or forcing the maintenance crew to spend additional time addressing the problem. Similarly, trees that are too close to greens or tee boxes, reduce the amount of air movement and sun needed to maintain quality turf, again requiring additional mechanical and human resources. Thus, master planning can address problem maintenance issues, which in turn can enhance aesthetic and playing issues.

Third, Master Plan renovations, reconstructions or enhancements can generate new interest in a course and by incorporating even small changes, such as additional tee boxes, will attract new members or users to a facility. Particularly with the increasing numbers of female, junior and senior golfers, a facility that can accommodate various levels of skill, while still providing a challenge to low handicap golfers, will hold a distinctive advantage over other, less accommodating courses in the area.

Fourth, golfers in the United States prefer wall to wall lush, green turf in comparison to those in the United Kingdom who will accept varying shades of “brown”, which is a topic worthy of discussion in a future column. Thus the challenge for superintendents in the United States is to keep the course green even during times of severe drought. Since superintendents do not control the weather, this challenges many antiquated irrigation systems, which lack the coverage expected and require excessive hand labor that is part of a partially automated or manual irrigation system.

Fifth, a coordinated Master Plan addresses a common mistake made by “piecemeal” renovations. That is, the tendency to install a new irrigation system and then two years later to desire new features such as an additional tee box or a revised green configuration. What commonly happens is that the design of these new facilities is guided by the existing irrigation system. The same thing can occur when golf car paths are installed without thought to future desired renovations. The result is that the irrigation system or a golf car path then dictates proposed aesthetic and play renovations and improvements. The point is that with a coordinated Master Plan, renovations of all golf course features (tee boxes, greens, bunkering, golf car paths, irrigation systems) are designed in concert.

Sixth, unsafe and unfair (poorly designed) playing conditions are common concerns for golf course superintendents and course owners / operators. Obviously, unsafe conditions pose a liability to the course and need to be addressed. Unfair playing conditions include car paths in or near primary playing areas, excessive cross slopes on fairways, and “invisible” playing hazards and intended landing areas. Obviously, unfair playing conditions result from sub-optimal design or poor maintenance. By resolving unfair playing conditions, the golf experience becomes more enjoyable to the golfer. Additionally, unfair playing conditions produce slow play, which in turn can result in loss of revenue and increased golfer frustration.

Seventh, because master planning considers overall course assessment, the golf architect can conduct an evaluation for poor course routing, awkward par sequencing, and “hole difficulty progression”. All of this can contribute to slow play, minimal interest and weak shot values. In some cases, simple re-routing or re-numbering of the golf holes can create a better progression of golf holes, allowing for more variety in the playing experience.

Eighth, when a course is undergoing repair or renovation, disrupted play is to be expected. However, because master planning considers the current golf operation as well as future improvements, golfers experience much less disruption during the time of construction. Sometimes, what appears to be a very aggressive renovation program turns out to be the least disruptive in terms of program implementation and facility operation.

It should be clear that a good Master Plan could address a variety of goals for the golf course owners and superintendents. In the next column, we will address the specific objectives of a Master Plan and the role of the golf architect.

*For further information on Master Planning and golf architecture, contact Ed Beidel of Beidel Design Associates, Inc. at 410-707-5623 or email Ed at [ed.beideldesign@att.net](mailto:ed.beideldesign@att.net). Beidel Design Associates are golf architects, land planners and landscape architects. Additionally, please refer to the **ASGCA publication “Golf Course Items – Expected Life Cycle”** that appears in the Course Renovation drop-down menu in the Golf Architectural Services section of the Beidel Design Associates website [[www.beideldesign.com](http://www.beideldesign.com)].*

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In the last column, we addressed the rationale and overall goals of a Golf Course Master Plan. In this column, we address the specific objectives of a Master Plan and the integral role of the golf architect.

What are the specific objectives of a Golf Course Master Plan?

First, the overall objective of a golf course Master Plan is to serve as a guide for future short term and long term improvement and renovation decisions. What is important to keep in mind is that a golf course Master Plan is generally ongoing. Facilities can move at whatever pace they desire to implement changes. They may choose to move aggressively or slowly, depending upon available resources. In fact, there may be some years when minimal renovation occurs. (Each of these strategies has advantages, which will be covered in a separate, upcoming column). It is important to remember, that a Master Plan keeps the renovation effort focused on the overall course objectives, and reminds the club / facility of the immediate and long range benefits.

Second, if the initial evaluation by the Golf Architect determines that there are course limitations such as unfair playing conditions, maintenance issues, or poorly constructed golf features, the objective of the Master Plan is to address these issues. By specifically targeting the course weaknesses, the golf architect will present design solutions that result in lower operating and maintenance costs, while at the same time creating a course that will generate interest, increase the number of rounds, and thus, increase revenues.

As noted, a third distinct advantage of a Master Plan is its broad perspective. By considering all of the components of the golf course as a unified whole, the plan guides the construction and renovation in a logical and coordinated fashion. However, a very specific objective of a Master Plan is to incorporate enough flexibility into the overall design so that the wishes of various constituent groups (players, owners, superintendent, greens committees, finance committee or the general manager) can be accommodated. Thus, even though there is a logical sequence, a good Master Plan still allows for some choice regarding when some aspects of the renovations can be addressed. In this way, golf facility personnel can pursue a renovation program that takes into account the available financial resources during any particular year.

Fourth, a golf course Master Plan should be specific enough to serve as a functional planning tool.

That is, it should provide budgetary cost estimates, suggested priority listings, construction documents, and graphical presentations of the course after renovation to enable the golf course personnel to (a) understand the impact of the improvements upon the aesthetic and strategic quality of the course, and (b) make sound planning and budgeting decisions regarding the timing of the implementation.

What is the advantage of having a golf architect design your Master Plan?

A golf architect has the necessary knowledge, education and training, and experience to produce a quality Master Plan. An important consideration is whether the individual who will develop your Master Plan has been trained in relevant areas such as civil engineering, landscape architectural design, or environmental issues. Although most golf architectural firms are solely golf designers, a collaborative “team approach” with other professionals, such as the engineers, landscape architects and environmental specialists is essential to ensure project success. A unique aspect of the training of a golf architect is their knowledge of the game of golf as well as the history of the game, understanding of the historical roots of golf architecture, and an appreciation for the various styles of golf course design. Without such a broad perspective, the Master Plan may not uniquely address the specific design features of a course. Rather, it may take on a “cookie cutter” appearance, where the same Master Plan philosophy is “forced to fit” courses of various types and with varying historical significance.

Although the golf architect guides the Master Plan, a successful renovation program should be the result of a close collaborative effort among various professionals. This includes the golf architect, golf course superintendent, golf committee, facility manager, golf professional, contractor and required support disciplines (e.g., site engineers, environmental professionals, landscape architects, surveyors). Without such collaboration, the solutions could be incomplete or improper, leading to frustration and the need of further renovation or the termination of the project.

The role of the golf architect is that of a program coordinator and external consultant in addition to that of the designer. Some golf architects will survey the users of the course as well as the course personnel prior to the design development phase. Surveying the facility users often provides a unique perspective, as well as providing a database of golfer statistics and opinions, that is usually considered in the design development process.

Of course, the golf architect conducts an on-site evaluation prior to presenting the course personnel with any renovation plans. This assessment allows the golf architect to gain an appreciation of the course character and use as well as first hand inspection of the areas of concern. Once all data are gathered, a Master Plan is developed. Actually, several different renovation schemes might be designed in order to provide course personnel with some choice about the “aggressiveness” of the renovation effort and the best option for the facility to pursue. These design schemes are presented to the course personnel and / or membership for discussion, evaluation, refinement, and ultimate acceptance.

In summary, a golf course Master Plan is a major planning tool for improvement and renovation that has both immediate and long-term benefits. Although Clubs and course owners may sometimes feel that a particular improvement is small and therefore, does not require the expertise and expense of a golf architect, courses rarely limit themselves to just one improvement. Over the years, these numerous small improvements can begin to take on a “patch work” appearance, which may be the result of changing course personnel or club / facility committees with different and sometimes competing perspectives. The advantage of a Master Plan is that the golf architect can weave these various opinions into a consistent vision. This approach negates a piecemeal appearance while providing an overall plan that ultimately is less expensive than the various short-term but sometimes overall ineffective solutions. The value of a long-range, coordinated perspective that considers all the golf course features simultaneously cannot be overstated.

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