

The renovation equation

How can a renovation double your membership? Or increase rounds played by 60 percent and raise revenue by over 90 percent? *By Design* looks at three projects with results of that scale and asks whether there is a formula for their success.



Image: Peter Wong

The renovation of Bakker Crossing in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, has resulted in a golf course that is unique in the local area

Golf course renovation work has often been considered, by club owners and members, simply in terms of cost.

In some instances, the renovation work may be deemed a necessity, perhaps to fix a faulty irrigation system or failing bunkers. Other projects are more of a luxury, to improve aesthetics and the playing experience for members and guests. Either way, the first question asked is often 'at what cost?'

But club owners are increasingly viewing renovation as an investment, where work is being planned with the return at the front of mind. And that's not just in terms of the extra revenue from additional rounds or a higher green fee, but also a result of reduced running costs such as maintenance and resources.

In many cases, the potential savings are so great that clubs will ask not whether they can afford to renovate, but whether they can afford not to (see box, 'The cost of inaction').

So what does it take to double membership, or increase rounds played by 60% and raise overall revenues by in excess of 90%? Is there a formula for this type of success? We consider the examples of three recent renovation projects that have delivered returns of this nature.

Bakker Crossing
Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Like most cities across the United States, the golf market in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, is highly competitive. There are a range of courses spanning the municipal, public and country club sectors. Bakker Crossing fell somewhere in the middle, as a moderately-priced public facility, known for presenting golfers with a challenging round.

With competition from all sides, the club saw a need to differentiate itself. It engaged golf course architect Kevin Norby, ASGCA, to conduct a long-range master plan study, and commissioned a detailed market and financial analysis by golf strategist J.J. Keegan.

The analysis revealed that there was an opportunity for Bakker Crossing to reposition itself in the local market as a higher-end public course. This would require an improvement in course conditioning, and making the course less difficult, but more strategic.

For club owner Donn Hill, the key was to maximize the appeal of the golf course to as many golfers as possible. "The purpose of the renovation was to improve playability of the golf course," he explains, "and give it some features to distinguish it from other courses."

This meant moving some of the water hazards so they were out of play for regular golfers, but still a challenge for the better player. And Bakker Crossing's distinguishing feature would come in the form of its bunkers.

"We're in a very windy part of the country and so sand splashed up on the face of bunkers is difficult to maintain, both when we get rain and wind," explains Hill. "Kevin and I worked on and came up with something that would be unusual in our area but still fit in with some of the history of golf."



"I wanted the bunkers to be deeper, so they would retain their sand on the relatively flat and windy site," adds Norby. "So we designed the bunker bases to be flat so the sand didn't wash out and maintenance was easier. And the faces are all lined with timbers at a 45-degree angle, so they are visible to golfers."

"The timber-faced bunkers look just great, really tremendous," says Hill. "The reason I love the bunkers is because they are a hazard for better players while making it easier for average players to play. If they hit the wood face, the ball will come out of the bunker almost every time. So the average player is happy, because they don't have to play another bunker shot."

In the case of Bakker Crossing, the renovation was just one part of the equation. "We changed our business model to appeal to more golfers," explains Hill. "We formed a new company based on golf and



Image: Peter Wong



Extensive tree removal at Union League Golf Club at Torresdale has helped to restore the course's original strategic values (inset, before renovation)

fitness called GreatLife, with the goal to enrich the lives of families and individuals. We wanted to grow the number of golfers in our community—not just take rounds from other places."

GreatLife has a range of fitness and golf facilities in the surrounding area, and members of one club have comprehensive privileges at numerous others.

The results at Bakker Crossing are impressive. Rounds rising from 26,000 per year pre-renovation to 43,000. Hill explains that it is hard to separate out the impact of the change in business model from the impact of the renovation. "But what I can tell you is from 2013 to 2016, our revenues are up 93%. Would it have worked if the course were not as playable? Probably not."

Union League Golf Club at Torresdale Philadelphia

Another club where a new approach to the business model went hand-in-hand with a renovation project is the former Torresdale-Frankford Country Club, located near the Delaware River in Northeast Philadelphia.

The cost of inaction

Golf clubs considering a renovation will pay close attention to the cost of the project. But as ASGCA Immediate Past President Greg Martin has emphasized, a complete view of the renovation equation also requires consideration to cost of inaction, which includes:

Maintenance—as elements of the golf course age and fail, additional manpower is needed to maintain them to a functional standard. This is particularly notable for irrigation and bunkering, which are the focus for many renovation projects.

Resources—in addition to manpower costs, inaction can lead to continued unnecessary expenditure on resources such as water, chemicals and parts.

Membership—a decaying golf course leads to member dissatisfaction and declining fees as existing members and potential new members choose a different club.

Guest fees—in a competitive marketplace, a lower quality product will attract a lower price point, limiting the potential income from guest fees.

Additional revenues—revenues associated with golf carts, food and beverage, lessons and more all decline if a facility is failing to attract a healthy flow of golfers.



Bunkers at Ridgemoor CC in Chicago were rebuilt, leading to significantly reduced daily maintenance (inset, before renovation)



Rick Jacobson, ASGCA, prepared a comprehensive renovation plan for Ridgemoor CC to improve all aspects of the golf course

Home to a Donald Ross course, the club had struggled since the financial crisis that began around 2008. By 2014, annual rounds had dwindled to 12,000 and membership had fallen from 350 to fewer than 150, despite dues remaining static for many years.

At the same time, The Union League of Philadelphia, a historic city club whose impressive League House occupies an entire block in Downtown Philadelphia, was looking to expand the facilities available to its members. A merger would provide the resources necessary to fund a renovation of the golf course.

The club hired golf course architect Stephen Kay, ASGCA, to oversee a $2.8 million project to renovate the golf course and practice facilities.

Kay describes the condition of the course at the time of the merger: "Bunkers held water after rain, tees were not level and some fairways drained poorly. Like many classic-era parkland courses that were overplanted in the 1960s and 70s, it had become overgrown with trees that encroached on fairways, restricted approach shots and hurt the greens agronomically.

"The course has a very good Donald Ross routing, with good strategy and great green contours," continues Kay. "We began by redesigning and rebuilding the driving range and adding a short game area."

This meant that facilities were available to use while the golf course was restored to the integrity of Ross's original design, with a few tweaks to suit the modern game. "We removed 400-500 trees, rebuilt tees, rebuilt the bunkers and softened the slopes on three of the greens so that they were suitable for today's green speeds," explains Kay.

The restoration made the golf course more enjoyable for players of all abilities. It is more challenging for

the best players and more playable for the older members and higher handicappers. Rounds increased to 25,000 per year and membership is now full at 350, with more on a waiting list.

"The restoration has been an overwhelming success by any measure," says Union League Golf Club at Torresdale consultant Rodger Gottlieb, "including membership growth and retention, rounds played, aesthetics, pride and ease of maintenance. It was done on time and on budget. It truly signifies a new era for an extraordinary Donald Ross gem, uniquely located in a major metropolitan city, that otherwise would have likely been headed for closure."

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Ridgemoor Country Club
Chicago

An oasis of green space in Chicago's urban sprawl, Ridgemoor Country Club has a unique place in championship history. It hosted the only Hale America National Open in 1942, which was arranged to replace the United States Open that was canceled due to World War II.

Tournament winner Ben Hogan would go on to claim the Hale America as a de facto fifth U.S. Open win, on a course that has seen great golf course architects including ASGCA Past President William B. Langford, A.W. Tillinghast and ASGCA Past President Larry Packard contribute to its design over the years.

In 2014, the club embarked on a renovation plan designed to provide its membership with an outstanding golf course for the next 20-30 years. Golf course superintendent Josh Langell explains that the aim was to provide "a golf course that can be regulated and managed by the grounds staff instead of a golf course that manages and regulates the staff."

Central to the renovation, overseen by Rick Jacobson, ASGCA, was the regrassing of tees, greens and fairways to a new pure bentgrass sward. This would allow the club to cut fungicide usage by over 50% compared to previous seasons, and requires significantly less irrigation water and labor for hand watering.

The club now has much more consistent playing surfaces which are easier to maintain, even during prolonged heat or drought conditions. Rebuilt bunkers, with new sub-base treatment and sand, also demand significantly less daily maintenance attention, with post-rainfall washout eliminated.

"Greens were restored back to their original sizes," says Jacobson, "and bunkers altered to be more reminiscent of the original intent." A new lake on the fifth hole also improves strategy and aesthetics.

Since its completion in 2015, the club has been able to raise initiation fees, dues, guest and cart fees, all while maintaining membership numbers and rounds played in a challenging and competitive golf market. As with the other projects referenced, this renovation has had an impact on both sides of the financial equation, lowering ongoing running costs while increasing revenue.

So, do these renovation projects suggest there is a simple formula that clubs can follow to achieve success? Likely not. Each faced unique circumstances that required a bespoke solution, suggesting that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for golf course renovation. But each saw a group of experts coming together for a collaborative review of the golf course and business model—a sensible starting point for any golf club considering a renovation.

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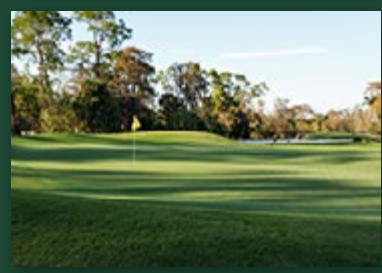
The July 2017 issue of *Golf Course Architecture* magazine profiles three more renovation projects by ASGCA members:



Photo: Evan Schiller © Medinah Country Club

Medinah Country Club
Chicago

ASGCA Past President Rees Jones, ASGCA, and his team have just completed a restoration of Tom Bendelow's design of the No. 2 course.



Photos: Drew Rogers

Royal Poinciana
Naples, Florida

One of the best clubs in the golfing hotspot of Naples now has a course to match, thanks to a renovation by Drew Rogers, ASGCA.



Photos: Larry Lambrecht

Olympic Club, San Francisco

ASGCA Past President Bill Love, ASGCA, has completed a bunker renovation at the storied club's famous Lake course.

Read the latest issue in full at *www.golfcoursearchitecture.net/magazine*