

The gathering storm



Bradley S. Klein
BKlein@Golfweek.com

Course renovations sometimes go sideways when members and architects clash over plans

Sometimes, the most successful meetings are the ones that never take place.

When architect Drew Rogers was hired at Old Elm Club in Highland Park, Ill., in 2010, he had a lot of freedom to restore the circa-1913 design by H.S. Colt. (Donald Ross was Colt's original construction foreman.) Along with a complete set of Colt's design drawings and opening-day photography of every hole, Rogers had the blessings of general manager Kevin Marion and superintendent Curtis James to do what he thought best. Rogers called it "about as perfect a working relationship as you could hope to have on a restoration."

Other than a 90-minute dinner in Chicago with an incoming green chairman, Rogers was allowed a free hand to plan and implement what became an ambitious transformation of the club. Everything had to be coordinated by Marion and James, but it was their job, not Rogers', to do the in-house management. Rogers could focus on the scope of work: considerable tree management, realignment of mowing lines, introduction of extensive short-grass areas, a rebuild of the bunkers and conversion of greens from *Poa annua* to bentgrass. He did all of that without a single "show and tell" PowerPoint presentation.

If only other architects were so lucky. If only other clubs were run so well.

It helps having the professional management team at a club on board and in sync without open dissent. It also helps to have membership confident to entrust the process to professionals.

At too many clubs I visit, the assumption prevails that the facility is a democracy and that dues-paying members have a right to examine and approve virtually every detail. This can lead to decision-making paralysis. Or at the very least, to some long, contentious meetings.

Unless the in-house committee overseeing the master plan has done its homework carefully and strategically organized its politics, there's every chance of a major blow-up at the gathering where the dues payers are exposed to the architect's ideas.

Small wonder that some otherwise highly qualified designers shy away from such renovation work, even

if it means forgoing a chance to restore a hidden gem by A.W. Tillinghast. "Too many meetings," as one designer told me. "A new course is much easier." Though these days, harder to find.

The bulk of design work in the U.S. today consists of major renovations and restorations, typically \$1 million to \$3 million worth of construction work. That's more than you usually can sneak in under some minimum outlay. It requires at many clubs that most-sensitive of gatherings: the moment when members get to voice their concerns about the proposed plan.

So here are some guidelines for reducing the inevitable friction of such a membership meeting:

1. Ninety-five percent of golfers don't care about architecture or design heritage; they care about good playing conditions. Concentrate on the problem areas – bad bunkers, lousy irrigation, greens that don't drain, etc.

2. Be careful about going hole by hole in a presentation. Twenty years ago I watched architect Ron Forse lose the membership at New Castle (Pa.) Country Club as he talked in detail about every hole. Luckily, he didn't lose the job, and he since has learned to limit his comments to a few representative holes or to one salient feature of each hole. Apparently, the more relaxed approach works, as his long list of clients now includes Salem Country Club in Peabody, Mass. and Country Club of Orlando (Fla.).

3. Hire experienced outside professionals. Only rely upon experts whom you can fire or sue. Never use volunteer in-house help in the form of landscape contractors or course designers for the main work. They can serve on committees, but the membership has to know that the pros employed by the club have extensive experience, no agenda or bias, and a proven track record.

4. Control the agenda and the Q&A. The worst meeting I ever saw was run by a three-person committee that walked off the golf course five minutes before the meeting, never planned their agenda, and immediately following the architect's presentation opened the floor to what became a mob attack upon the idea of any work at all. Then they sat

back and let the designer take the brunt of the assault without intervening. A committee's work is painstaking. The members need to anticipate criticism and have answers ready about scope of work, budgets, impact on play. There's also nothing devious about planting supporters around the room to deal with overtly hostile criticism and to pose constructive comments as a counterweight.

5. Finally, don't try to make everyone happy. A certain percentage of members are probably miserable wretches whose main goal in life is to make everyone as unhappy as they are. They are the reason that clubs are subject to the 90/10 rule, by which 90 percent of the noise and complaints emanates from 10 percent of the membership. At a certain point, it's best to stop

trying to placate these members because they never will be satisfied. The standard here is to appeal to the middle ground of a silent majority and let the perpetual complainers recede into a dark corner of the room to self-medicate.

6. Which reminds me of one other helpful rule. At some point, cut off the liquor supply. Don't go deeper with the drinks than 30 minutes into the meeting. And don't make it an open bar. Let them buy their own liquor. Otherwise, you'll hear a line I once heard at a heated meeting when an outside expert finally had had enough with a particularly persistent member's hostile line of inquiry. "Isn't there a three-drink maximum on stupid questions?" asked the consultant.

The line won over the rest of the room. **Gwk**



COURTESY OLD ELM CLUB