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Painful Gas and Bloating

By: Nathan Crace   Date: June 18, 2008

Recently, Congress has called America's oil company executives to Capitol Hill for a good ol' fashioned Senate grillin'. "How dare you make so much money!" "How can you sleep at night making so much money?" "Have you no sense of decency, sir?" Okay, so the last one was from another time, but we all get the point. What you don't hear is the big oil CEO retort: "So how's your financial portfolio doing with all of those evil oil stocks in it, Senator?" But I digress.

Most of us have no clue exactly how the energy markets work—and we really don't care to know. Sure places like China and India are driving up worldwide demand, OPEC is tightening the spigot, and we can't drill for our own oil here in the homeland, but what is clear cut is that it cost me $91.38 to fill up my truck last week! And even if I could fit my three kids, dog, wife, and myself with all of the softball and baseball gear in a Honda Accord, I still couldn't pull my trailer with it. So for now, I drive my SUV—and I do not apologize for it. Do I wish I could get better mileage? You bet. I keep a closer eye on tire pressure now, slow down a little when driving, use the cruise control on the highway, and keep the air filter changed regularly. But like everyone reading this column, there comes a time when you have to make a decision and start cutting back somewhere.

If you live in a rural area, carpooling is pretty much a moot point. And who's to say that driving all over the place to pick up four other people doesn't use as much gas as those same five people driving directly to work anyway? You may drive a Prius or ride a bicycle to work. You may grow your own vegetables, never mow your yard, outfit your roof with solar panels or even ditch the roof altogether and build an adobe hut to try and reduce your "carbon footprint" on this big blue ball we all ride on, but one way or another, the spike in gas prices hurts.

We all have to eat. We all have to wear clothes. And we all need shelter. So when it comes to feeding your kids and paying the house note, or cutting back on other "non-necessity" items, we tend to gravitate toward keeping our families fed and a roof over their heads. That's when the supply line of expendable income and the demand line of recreation and necessity collide. And at the epicenter of this train wreck are a large number of public golf courses. If everyone who plays golf at a public course decides to cut back by one round a month, it hurts that course. Not to say that private and semi-private courses aren't feeling the pinch too, but public courses don't have a stream of monthly membership payments and food minimums to ease the burden.

Everyone feels the increase of costs in supplies from fuel and food to electricity and labor costs. Unfortunately, the grass on your favorite golf course doesn't realize that gas prices are up almost double in the past year and it continues to grow at the same rate. So golf courses (and other turf based recreational facilities) find themselves in the unenviable position of having maintenance costs skyrocket while revenue dips because golfers are cutting back on playing to save money to fill up their own tanks.

In the end, I really don't care how much the CEO of Exxon makes in a year. This is still America the last time I looked and capitalism is part of what makes this the greatest country on Earth. I wouldn't want the government to control or subsidize gas any more than I would want them telling me how often I could run my air conditioner each day. On the other hand, I can understand how obscene some of the salaries may seem to everyday folks—I don't know that I could even personally fathom that much money. What I do know is that until supply and demand balance out, the prices will continue to rise. Economics 101: plain and simple. So we all do a little to cut back and conserve, some buy hybrid cars, some do other things. If we could do some careful exploration for our own oil here in America without too much environmental impact, then that would help too. And another point that gets all too often overlooked is the weak dollar right now, which keeps prices going up in a global economy. It's no one person or industry's fault, but it's also not "rocket surgery."

One interesting thing about golfers is that we typically don't completely stop playing golf when the economy turns downward or slows. We may play a little less, but we also look for less expensive alternatives for our golf addiction. So instead of playing the course that charges $65 for a weekend round, we play the one that charges $45 and put that extra $20 in our tank or on the dinner table. But I didn't climb up on my soapbox to use my bully pulpit and say that we should all keep playing golf in lieu of feeding the kids or paying the house note. What I am saying is that we all need to remember that the employees at the courses we play probably have families and mortgages too and we are all in the same boat. I wouldn't be surprised to see some big discounts coming soon from these courses to jumpstart demand again and that's ultimately good for the consumer and the provider. Economics 101.

Nathan Crace is a golf course architect and member of the Golf Writers Assoc. of America whose freelance "Lipouts" column is based, at times, on topics submitted to the author by readers like you. If you have a topic you would like to see discussed or wish to read past columns from his archives, log on to www.lipouts.com and let him know or email him at nathan@watermarkgolf.com.