



# The Association Landscaper

## Finding the Right Partnership

*[by Jack Carr, P.E., RS, LEED-AP]*

**Sure, it's cold out there.** It's Maine and we have long winters, but if the condo board is to find a good landscaper for spring projects, now's the time to start looking. Landscaping contractors are overhauling their equipment, looking for experienced crews, and scheduling their current customers, so if you wait until the frost is out of the ground, the good ones won't be available.

Finding a good landscaper is not easy. Not that there aren't many competent landscapers in Maine, it's just they all might not be a good fit for your

community. Some landscapers focus on commercial customers with very specific annual needs, not needing a lot of handholding. Some landscapers prefer high-end residential clients with deep pockets and fancy estates following the design magazine trends. Other landscapers are accustomed to maintaining apartment complexes and only have to deal with experienced landlords.

Condos are different. Condos are a hybrid, so be cautious with an unwary new landscaper not familiar with dealing with both a professional association

manager and a board—not to mention the very opinionated unit owners. Trying to keep everyone happy is not for all landscapers. The selection process should focus on this very real issue, as well as cost and competency, otherwise your engagement may be short-lived with your burnt-out landscaper disappearing in his red pickup.

### **SELECTION PROCESS ROI**

Good landscaping is an investment. Most people in the real estate industry will acknowledge quality landscaping

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creates real and measurable value—perhaps as much as 16 percent in condo unit sales value when compared to communities with poor curb appeal. This equates in return on investment in excess of 200 percent of the installation cost of plants and landscape amenities. In addition to units maintaining or increasing their sales value, the value of community pride and quality of life can be profound. Therefore, searching for the right landscaper is worth the effort. This search should start with the board agreeing on goals clearly related to prospective landscape contractors. Certainly budgetary matters can be discussed at this time, but until the landscape priorities are established, no progress can be made.

Develop a list of three or four landscapers to be considered. This list is best developed from referrals from your association manager, members of other local condo communities, or other condo service providers. This will help to shorten the list to contractors who will have some understanding of working for a community. Next, set up an interview schedule after the board has had a chance to review and approve the written goals and a written set of specific questions to be addressed to each candidate.

Following introduction between the board and landscaper, the contractor should be given an opportunity to discuss his company and its history and experience. Each interview should follow an outline agenda with the next step being the board presenting the community's goals. The landscaper should be allowed to consider these goals and discuss concerns or offer suggested improvements. A consensus does not have to be established at this point, but the goals of the association must be expressed early in the process.

With the general scope of work stated, more specific information regarding the contractor's ability to properly crew and supervise the job can be discussed. An understanding of how many crews are supervised by one individual and over what territory or number of other communities is important to forecast future service. This would be a good time to discuss possible schedules, including completion time frames, communication on-site to address service requests, and monthly accomplishment reports.

It should be kept in mind that your community is in competition for crew time. Most communities prefer on-site service on Thursday or Friday and not over the weekend. Allowing the landscaper's crew to work on Tuesday or Wednesday may provide negotiation chips for a better deal. Price is always an issue, but don't make the mistake of forcing a low price only to get unsatisfactory performance. The board's goals should include wanting to re-hire the selected landscaper in the future.

As with hiring any service provider, references must be checked

and insurance coverage confirmed. The conclusion of the final selection process should include the contractor providing information regarding his chain of command and how future communication concerning billing, rescheduling, and expected work environment including times/location of crew breaks and mobilization, start/finish times, noise issues, and speed of equipment. The board should suggest the landscaper attend periodic board or landscaping meetings.

After the contract award, the contractor will provide a site map highlighting key issues agreed upon. An initial meeting with the board representative and key crew members can be very helpful. It should always be kept in mind the community is forming a partnership with the landscaper to create attractive grounds for all to be proud.



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