

# Contracting for Grounds Maintenance Services

By Sabeena Hickman, CAE, CMP

The economic downturn forces organizations to take a serious look at their budgets, and when it comes to ground maintenance, one of the first questions is: Should we consider outsourcing the work? To be sure, professional landscape companies have seen an increase in the number of educational and municipal facilities that want to completely or partially outsource their grounds maintenance operations.

## SCOPE OF WORK

Consider the scope of work you want a contractor to handle. Are you outsourcing the entire grounds maintenance operation or just part of it? Many large landscape companies can handle a full range of work from basic maintenance and landscape design and installation to lawn maintenance, irrigation, tree care, water feature management, and even paving and snow removal. Determine what services are most important to you and if you want them all to be provided by one company, if you will use more than one provider, or a mix of in-house and contracted workers.

## PUBLIC SAFETY

A contracted landscape company should enhance the reputation of the institution. Consider a company's history working with large facilities or public institutions. Most public facilities stress the need for public awareness, safety, and cleanliness as top concerns. Companies who have worked with public institutions know that their employees need to have a high level of awareness of the public and behave courteously and attentively and not be intrusive.

Ask about a company's safety record and what requirements they have in place

for personnel and equipment. Professional landscape companies put safety first through extensive training, power equipment certification, and safety meetings.

## SUSTAINABILITY

Institutions looking for sustainable landscape practices should discuss options with potential companies or address specifications in the RFP. Many landscape companies have water management specialists, as well as professionals educated in sustainable landscape practices like the use of drought tolerant, low-water native plants; green roof or green wall installation; organic lawn and landscape maintenance; composting of green waste; and installation of water-saving drip irrigation systems. Some institutions are installing edible landscapes and teaching gardens with the help of professionals. Companies can also assist with the goals set out for LEED-certified buildings.

For institutions that have specialized landscapes such as ponds, large water features, or agricultural areas to maintain, investigate a contract company's skill set and consider what specialized staff the new company can bring to the table.

## SELECTING THE BEST COMPANY

It is important to take all of these factors into account when writing an RFP and putting a job out to bid. Many institutions will actually look to outside landscape companies to consult on specifications for the RFP. Many RFPs include criteria to ensure that the company is:

- state licensed,
- has Landscape Industry Certified, Certified Irrigation Contractor, Certified Grounds Manager, or Certified Arborist staff,

- follows industry standards,
- has a criminal screening process for hiring staff,
- has extensive safety training procedures, and
- maintains maintenance records for equipment.

When selecting a company, make sure their proposal captures your expectations accurately in the scope of work, which should include startup plan and the ability to offer multi-year plans with designs and budgets so you can plan for the future.

Consider their reputation. Find out how long they've been in business and get a sense of how they approach customer service, quality control, safety compliance, training programs, communication methods, and responsiveness to special requests, problems and emergencies. Ask for references of similar properties so you can look at their work and see their crews in action. Be sure to call any references they provide.

When making the transition from in-house to completely contracted services, facility managers should look for a company that understands the politics and difficulty that surrounds the possibility of laying-off of staff or incorporating them into a new organization.

Assess whether they have tenured professionals. Make sure they are licensed and insured to operate in your state and are in good standing. Strong horticultural knowledge is an absolute necessity along with formal knowledge of maintenance operations, irrigation, tree care, and pest control. Association memberships and certification is an indicator of the provider's commitment to maintaining the most current knowledge and skills.

Investigate how they measure customer satisfaction. Do they capture feedback on performance from every customer to measure their level of satisfaction and identify ways to continuously improve service delivery?

Resist the impulse to merely accept the lowest bid. "You will definitely save money when you contract out the grounds maintenance services," says Chris Kujawa, executive vice president of Kujawa Enterprises in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. "The question is whether you will get a great partner who is flexible and able to deal with all your special concerns like scheduling around band practice, weather, and sports events and still be able to provide a great service."

#### IT'S REALLY ABOUT THE PARTNERSHIP

"We always start with a partnering meeting," says Bill Horn, vice president at California- and Colorado-based Terracare Associates. "We never assume anything. Every situation is different, priorities are different, and we want to hear the goals and concerns from the institution."

When a partnership is formed, facility managers should take advantage of having a fresh set of eyes on the property. Horn suggests asking the new company to do an assessment of the grounds and make recommendations for improvements to any areas that raise public safety concerns, as well as areas where maintenance could be improved, water waste can be reduced, etc.

Many facilities are choosing to outsource their grounds maintenance program for financial reasons. If managers choose a professional company that is a good fit with the needs of the institution, there are many opportunities for a high-value partnership with benefits that go beyond just the pocketbook. ☞

Sabeena Hickman is the chief executive officer of PLANET, the Professional Landscape Network, based in Herndon, VA. This is her first article for *Facilities Manager*, and she can be reached at [sabeenahickman@landcarenetwork.org](mailto:sabeenahickman@landcarenetwork.org).

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