

## The Landscape Contractor

Well-maintained common areas, attractive landscaping and a pleasant overall environment are essential to the quality of life in any community. Curb appeal is a key component in the desirability of a neighborhood and the value of individual homes. Maintaining common areas is one of the most basic community association responsibilities, and there are significant advantages to contracting with professionals for these services.

By properly contracting for landscape services, an association can save money and extend the life of planted goods. Finding and working successfully with the right landscaping contractor is very important to the association's success.

Developing a clear, comprehensive landscaping contract is the first step. A contract provides prospective contractors a specific guide to follow when developing their proposals. Additional proposals should be considered, but ask contractors to submit these as an addendum to the specifications. This makes it easier to evaluate each company by the same criteria. Contracts should include realistic maintenance specifications and schedules and require contractors to be environmentally responsible and properly insured.

Once the contract is developed, associations should get bids from several contractors. When deciding who should bid on your contract, look for contractors with relevant experience who operate responsible and viable businesses. Look for companies that have worked with other associations similar to yours; you don't want bids from companies too small or too large for your community. Be sure to get current references. Once the references check out, make an appointment to tour the grounds of their community in person to get a good feel for the contractor's work.

Before making a final selection, meet with each contractor's representative. Try to get a sense of the personnel. Satisfactory performance requires a well-supervised, competent staff.

Before signing a contract with a landscape contractor, ask the association attorney to review the final version. These and other considerations will contribute to a successful working relationship between the association and the contractor.

Once the contractor begins working with the association, be sure to monitor performance regularly and ensure that the company is complying with the contract. Address any deficiencies immediately to give time for him to correct errors.

Landscaping isn't always viewed by community residents as an amenity; however, maintaining common areas can require significant expenditures. Boards may need to educate owners about the reasons for these expenditures and the indirect value of this expense. Landscape contractor fees may seem like an added expense at first; but, in the long run, the additional cost will be less than the losses that might be incurred without professional help. These fees are a small price to pay compared to the cost of replacing an entire turf area damaged by disease.

Landscape maintenance requires much more than mowing, weeding and other services offered by a lawn service. A good landscape maintenance contractor should have expertise in horticulture, including plant disease treatment, chemical use, edging methods, appropriate time for pruning, cutting heights and other detailed maintenance requirements. A trained contractor can remedy landscape problems and outline a detailed landscape maintenance program that will please residents and keep property values up.