

# Getting into the Weeds

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A construction project for a condominium association is relatively straight forward to award. Retain an engineer, design the project, develop plans and specifications, solicit and evaluate contractor proposals, make an award and perform construction monitoring to ensure the project is built as designed. But what happens when the project can't be so well defined like landscape maintenance? What are the important factors in defining the scope of services, soliciting bids and monitoring a contractor's performance?

Let's start with the scope of services: mowing, trimming, mulching, weeding, clippings removal, leaf collection. All of these services can be subjective as to the level of performance. Is mowing based on maintaining a grass height? Frequency of mowing? Then comes mulching. How many inches deep? Coarse or finely ground?

When defining the scope of services, a review of the associations' governing documents is also required. This is a critical step as all parties involved must understand the association's responsibilities when it comes to maintaining common areas. The metes-and-bounds

description of the community should also be reviewed; no board member wants to find out that the association has been paying the landscape contractor to mow the neighbor's field.

Defining the scope of services must be a customized process for each association. Perhaps you have a good relationship with your current landscaper. A negotiated renewal could be the approach you take. First, look at the past proposal and scope of work upon which the current contract is based. Sit down with the landscaper and review performance. Tighten up the scope of work, add measurable performance objectives, and add or remove services. A measurable objective could be to maintain hedge height at 42" plus or minus 3". With unpredict-

*CONTINUES ON PAGE 22*

*"Sit down with the landscaper and review performance."*



## WEEDS...

from page 20.

able weather, it may not make sense to demand 24 mowing's per season when a height-based performance standard like maintain grass height 2½ - 4" would be better.

It is important to involve board members and the landscape committee. It might even be worthwhile to involve the homeowner that is the loudest critic of past performance. While a committee-based approach may take a bit longer and present certain challenges, it can also make the final agreement (not to mention management and the board) less susceptible to broad based criticism or revision due to an oversight or omission.

With good faith and trust between all parties, a negotiated renewal with a current vendor that incorporates lessons learned, could be the best solution for your community. However, keep in mind that due diligence is still required.

If you are looking to make a change in contractor, research becomes critical. Drive around to look at similar communities in the vicinity. If they look good, find out the name of the contractor that maintains that property. If you are in a large management company, confer with your colleagues. Look in the CAI-NJ Membership Directory. Call 3 – 5 companies of the size needed for the magnitude of your community and discuss elements of service. In your initial discussion with contractors, you will probably get some ideas of how to define scope in your request for proposals. Ask for a proposal with 2 – 3 service package options based on your experience.

## Some specifics of scope in your request for proposals could be:

<b>Grass mowing:</b>	Frequency or height-based performance standard.
<b>Hedge clipping:</b>	Maintain height and width dimensions plus or minus X inches.
<b>Leaf cleanup:</b>	Beginning and end dates of leaf removal and how many removal cycles will there be during leaf season.
<b>Storm damage:</b>	Minor damage not causing a delay in normal landscape maintenance should be in normal scope of work.
<b>Herbicides:</b>	This can be a hot button issue, allowable types and application periods should be defined — resident notification, and warning signage as required by law.
<b>Weeding:</b>	One of the biggest challenges is the subjective measure of weeding – “Neat and orderly appearance” is the industry standard with a couple of metrics.
<b>Owner responsibility:</b>	Some finicky owners want to maintain their own plantings. Carefully define the specific area(s) carved out and make sure they conform to the governing documents.
<b>Time on site</b>	This can be a touchy subject, but the question here should be about what the association is purchasing. Is it buying a process, a result, a bit of both? Some communities want specific numbers of personnel on site for specific numbers of days each week. However, the more well defined the scope, the more flexible man-hour and days-per-week requirements can be – this flexibility can be very beneficial to all parties involved. Reducing focus on man-hour requirements while increasing focus on performance standards may lead to better results.
<b>Winter pickup:</b>	Presence on site will depend on the community's wants, needs, and finances. For large properties one day per week minimum, three days per week maximum could be a good range. Crew size will also be dependent on size and type of property.
<b>Reports and meetings:</b>	Define reports required and meetings to be held with landscaper.

After you have selected your contractor and they have begun work, a weekly evaluation of performance is a must. On a large site, 40% or more of a single manager's time could be spent on landscape, landscape work

orders, and performance evaluation of the landscape contractor. Develop a checklist to be submitted weekly by the contractor:

- Completed tasks

- Problems
- Omissions from scope and why

Send the weekly reports to the landscape committee or the board of directors.

For seasonal activities, do a walk through with the landscape contractor supervisor. For example: Mulch completed and to the proper depth; leaves were all removed as of this date. Provide the documentation to the landscape committee, board of directors, and the contractor.

Schedule quarterly meetings with multiple levels of contractor management. The site supervisor in the same room with the account manager and company president will impress upon the landscape company how seriously the com-

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munity views landscape appearance. It can have a very positive effect on performance. This is the time for a mutual check-in, review of weekly checklists and any mid-course corrections.

Be careful of scope creep. Severe storm damage requires a new work order. Owners may request the contractor perform separate work on their specific unit. Make sure the contractor understands they must have a separate contract with that owner, that double dipping on labor is not allowed, and the bylaws may require adherence to an approved planting list.

Have a year-end performance evaluation. What went well and what

*CONTINUES ON PAGE 24*



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## WEEDS...

from page 23.

could be improved? Hopefully, the landscape committee or board of directors will be satisfied and you will be able to negotiate next year's contract with a known quantity.

Education of the community is almost as important as managing the landscaper. Leaves still fall in February long after leaf cleaning season is over. Extended rain, like we have had in 2018, will make mowing of steep slopes and wet areas difficult and even destructive or dangerous. Nothing looks good in a drought or immediately following a destructive storm. Owners must have realistic expectations, even with high performance standards. We are dealing with living, growing organisms. If perfection is expected, tear it up; put down AstroTurf and plant plastic. ■



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