

MUNICIPAL MANAGERS LEARN TO COMPETE FOR BUDGET FUNDS

By John Kerr, Assistant Editor

In every municipality in the U.S., one person or a team of superintendents commands the grooming of public buildings and grounds. These people — public works directors, landscape supervisors, urban foresters, park and recreation directors, and an array of other titles which represent similar responsibilities — must maintain trees, turf, parks, street medians, and right-of-ways. Like park directors, these managers must contend with reduced budgets and naive legislators. Yet unlike park directors, they have little if any way to produce revenue and are often considered extravagant spenders.

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Municipal grounds managers are learning from their competition — every other tax-paid department — how to accrue precious budget funds. They are organizing their work force, innovating new programs, and inventoring vegetation down to a seedling. This provides concrete evidence of their work and its effectiveness, like a city engineer who shows blueprints for a bridge or building, and gives leverage at budget time.

"We have convinced the policy makers it pays to maintain at a quality level," says Robert Skira, city forester in Milwaukee, WI. "There's a fine edge between quality and everything else. Once you slip past quality and into routine maintenance you're almost spending the same money, but you can never get on top of it. That puts you into an irreversible state in which you're always behind. If you had a little more money you could stay ahead."

At budget time, Skira brings an accurate inventory of his plants, evergreens, and ornamental trees; graphic descriptions of what his bureau could do and how much better it would look with additional funds; and goals and objectives for each particular project. "Legislators simply say yes or no," says Skira. "But at least they have the big picture and we try to make them acutely aware of the impact if they don't accept a particular level of service that we feel is economically feasible and at the same time adds to the environment."

An example Skira gives is his goal for the city's 305,408 street trees: "to continue to reforest and maintain the quality of the urban forest with all its environmental benefits at a level that will increase both the value of the trees and the real estate value of Milwaukee." He wants to set a value for every tree and then project what that value will be over a 10-year period if the trees are maintained properly. He will show through the International Society of Arboriculture's table what the increase in value will be.

With this plan mapped out, Skira shows exactly how important it is for a reasonable level of maintenance. "For some reason or other, foresters have not been able to sell their products on the basis they too have a life span. We say what the thing is, how much it will cost, what it's worth, and how you should be spending "x" dollars to preserve those values," he says.

He keeps his inventory constantly updated to consistently build a sound argument for the policy makers. Newly-developed areas are added to the forestry bureau's charts. Skira lobbies for his cause and realizes the importance of record keeping and thorough maintenance studies. "These kinds of things are necessary in today's world to manage vegetation," he says.

Skira also gets involved in decisions on new construction projects which he will eventually be maintaining. He may discuss the advantages of fashioning a boulevard out of a new or renovated road. This makes a roadway safer, the main consideration, but also increases the property value since the new design will sport flowers, ornamental trees, and shade trees. By being there at the planning stage, he can also save the city money on something like a sprinkler hookup, which is much cheaper to do before all construction begins.

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Converting from manual valves to pop-up head sprinklers and hydraulically-operated valves, saves labor and water for the city. Flower beds in boulevards have been trimmed down so large mowers speedily cut the grass between the beds and the road.

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New landscaping in Milwaukee includes more woody perennial material and less annuals. Skira's crew uses lots of wood chips around trees to preserve water and reduce trimming. The crew has discontinued heavy fertilizer treatments and combined fertilizing with herbicides in one fall spray. With small gasoline-engine trucks that have a hydraulic pump, hydraulic stick saws have been added, which triple the previous amount of low-level pruning.

Skira is planning to computerize his inventory because he thinks that will make his records unquestionable. Thomas McDermott, landscaping and cemetery superintendent of Charlotte, NC, has already begun a computerized inventory for his tree maintenance program. Computers tell him where the trees are, what they are, how large, and what problems they have. This helps him manage problems before citizens complain and gives him a systematic pruning schedule.

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McDermott is trying to keep a study of each project he has going every year. "If the cost is out of line for what it should be, then we can do something about it," he says. "If we don't know what our costs are, we don't know we have a problem." Careful track of costs will help determine whether it's beneficial to contract out some maintenance. "Then we could concentrate more on the aesthetic high visibility, high maintenance projects we might have without additional personnel."

Although McDermott has not had his budget cut, he's not getting any new people for his crew. He has tried to compensate through an extensive spraying program and efficient use of equipment.

"We can weed a bed chemically in probably one-fifth the time it would take our hands to do it," he says. Roundup has been very useful, particularly in beautification projects in which he doesn't fear for neighboring plant material. Soil sterilants, because of their volatile nature, work well on Charlotte's right-of-ways — Pramitol for street right-of-ways, Treflan as a preemergent weed control, and Casoron for winter weed control.

McDermott has changed mowing techniques, going to larger, more dependable equipment. His crew uses the front-mounted type of lawnmower that Toro makes to speed his grass maintenance. Mott side-mounted flail mowers cut the right-of-ways. And so he doesn't ever have to cut some areas, McDermott plants groundcover.

San Morita, superintendent of parkway maintenance, a division of public works in Anaheim, CA, has reduced his maintenance duties through new

types of irrigation systems and different plant materials. "We are going more to automation in grounds maintenance," says Morita. He is experimenting with drip systems and hi-pop sprinkler heads to irrigate with less water.

In the median islands around Anaheim, the trend is away from turf. Morita is planting materials like raphiolepis and Indian Hawthorne, and groundcover which are not individual plants like gazanias but others such as star jasmine and lantanas. The object is plants with color but not just annual flowering.

Since he has limited funds to work with, and feels that he is using his technical expertise and equipment to the fullest, Morita is now concentrating on employee incentive. "The main aspect of it is to keep as many employees on the job as possible and then motivate them through some type of program," he says.

He is working hard on employee safety. "First of all, if a man is hurt, he's suffering and also can't perform the job he was hired for." Last year Morita reduced the injury frequency rate over 50 percent through clear safety standards and regularly scheduled meetings to review them. What was before very general is now carefully written so everyone can understand. "If there's a violation, we'll get on it and take action," he says.

"Second, we want to give an employee an opportunity to attend seminars to improve his talents and skills. We want to give responsibility to the individual, make him a person, not a number," Morita says. Outstanding employees have the opportunity to attend equipment shows and seminars on topics such as safety or pruning. The International Society of Arboriculture sponsors Street Tree Seminar Inc., monthly meetings which Morita's crew attends.

In Detroit, a city that is rebuilding much of its downtown, many landscaped grounds are being added. Two people who head up the maintenance work — Karl Ackerman, senior associate forester, and John Tatti, senior assistant forester — are trying to influence the new designs for low maintenance.

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"Landscape architects keep putting in spacious areas and lots of trees," Tatti says. "They have to develop different techniques for us to maintain with less people. All of maintenance is going to come down to low cost." Ackerman says he reviews plans of even the private landscape firms to try to

eliminate details which will cause troublesome maintenance in the future.

Ackerman is figuring the 1980-81 budget with a 16 percent reduction. "We are going to be hard pressed to do grounds maintenance work on areas like ball diamonds, playground equipment, and that sort of thing," he says. He will be losing 40 to 45 people for the fall/winter season and that will curtail leaf pickup and late autumn mowing.

Tree care is fairly safe of budget cuts because 90 percent of its funds come from the state Gas and Weight Tax and other reimbursements outside the city. Under the Federal Block Grant Program, Detroit can plant 20,000-25,000 trees a year along residential streets. The city contracts out tree and stump removal and tree planting.

Snow removal, ice rink maintenance, and grounds funds all come from local taxes, which will mean some drastic cutbacks. Fertilizing has been almost eliminated except in the downtown area. The two foresters have a soil sterilization program along fences which they will try to keep and have installed mowing strips under fences to prevent grass from growing.

In the past few years, the city has begun to install splash strips along roadside curbs, but not enough in Tatti's opinion. "Wherever they use salt they're killing off all the grass and plant material along the curbs. They're going to have to design splash strips all over with a little more pitch to them. It's folly to plant seed or sod in the spring and have it killed off in the winter."

Tatti began an early morning operation during the summer with a seven-man crew that was willing to work on any type of project. They started at 4 a.m., hours before the traffic began to inhibit their mobility and freedom to work. Tatti figured he covered more in three hours than a regular shift crew could do in five. Without traffic, they could park heavy vehicles on the street instead of on top of the grass.

No maintenance operation in the country is immune to the bite of inflation and budget reductions, but some have been hit harder than others. One that took it on the chin this summer is Dallas, TX, where gasoline for park and street maintenance was reduced 80 percent. Eddie Hueston, superintendent of park maintenance, said the situation caused a whole new schedule of priorities and a shakeup of traditional methods, but the final effect may be positive.

Safety items were put at the top of all priorities, followed by public health, landscaped areas that were irrigated, active recreation areas, large picnic areas, and down at the bottom was routine forestry work and mowing of median centers that weren't irrigated. Since everybody noticed the unkept medians, these became the most controversial. Hueston says, "Some of the furor may have helped the city fathers realize some areas are pretty sacred and could not be touched."

But no gas from mid-June through August also meant a total reorganization of the maintenance program. "We had to abandon our method of thinking for all kinds of maintenance," Hueston says. The first thing to do was to break down the five city

districts further so there would be less travelling. In smaller parks, individual caretakers have been reinstalled to take care of the whole area and equipment has been redistributed. "We're probably getting better care of our parks now," Hueston says. "There's quite a bit of pride if one person knows that's his park."

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Hueston says that he actually caught up on tree maintenance in many areas, mostly in corrective tree work. "We sent people into a large park and they didn't drive around a lot to different projects but just worked right there with hand tools." The crew noticed what had to be done in nearby areas. Turf care didn't suffer much because it fell into the category of landscape areas, which were a priority.

"It made us take a real hard look at how efficient we had been," he says. "I think the overall effect caused us to look at how we were doing things and we began to look at them in a whole different manner. I think we probably trimmed down some areas better than we had been doing before. We kept better track of things because we had to account for them."

Although Hueston's department is not facing the same cutbacks for next year, it still must scrutinize how much to spend on gasoline with the possibility it may be 50 percent of the budget. He thinks it is very likely that he will continue the reorganization undertaken over the summer. He must decide what emergency measures to retain and still keep quality maintenance. It is a situation many others may soon face.

Involving the community is one way Thomas Metz, superintendent of lands and buildings of Bowling Green, OH, has received response to a lack of manpower. With only five people and some CETA workers to maintain 300 acres of parkland and plant 500 trees a year, Metz took his plight to the downtown merchants.

Since all the city's trees are bought with revenue sharing funds, the dilemma for Metz once he planted the trees, was to be able to maintain them. So he started an adopt-a-tree program. He went to the downtown merchants and asked if they would maintain, water, and keep litter from around a tree outside their business. The response was very positive and Metz estimates the success rate of trees has increased from 60 to 76 percent.

"A lot of people didn't know we existed," Metz says. He and the tree commission visited many people and issued pamphlets with their names and

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Physical Protection — Heavy snow or ice cover can be injurious to many plants especially those with multiple leader stems such as taxus, arborvitae, upright juniper and others. Tying can help to prevent the plants from breaking. Tying should be done before the first snowfall. The twine or soft rope should be fastened at the base of the plant and wound spirally upward to the top and back down in reverse to compress the shrub's size.

Burlap is often used to screen out the drying effects of the wind and sun and also where winter hardiness is questionable. Before covering the plant with burlap it should be either tied or staked and then the burlap applied. Burlap can be used as a wind screen with a strip of it protecting the plants from the prevailing winds or it can be used as a complete cover by surrounding the entire plant. The cover should be put on after the leaves have dropped from the deciduous shrubs and it should be removed early in the spring.

Lath can be used either over shrubs for protection against sliding roof-top snow or by surrounding them for protection against the drying effects of the wind and the sun. Snow fencing, burlap, evergreen boughs or Christmas tree greens, baskets and wooden crates also provide good protection. Whenever posts are necessary to support any type of physical protection they should be put in the ground before it freezes. The actual pro-

tection (burlap, lath etc.) should not be put around the plant until early winter.

The types of physical protection are endless since it is really a matter of common sense. Although I would like to mention that plastic should NEVER be used, for the plants under it will simply cook from the heat of the sun.

It is unfortunate that many forms of physical protection are not esthetically appealing in the landscape for they are a great tool in preventing winter damage and death of plant materials. It was interesting for me to discover just how little they are used in this area on commercial sites due to the added cost involved and the overall appearance of the landscape.

Sometimes during an unusual winter, damage occurs in spite of protective measures. Fortunately this does not happen very often but if it does, carefully inspect the plants before calling the situation hopeless. Some plants such as some forms of Ilex and others will appear to be dead. In such cases the bark should be inspected for signs of life by gently peeling back a little piece of it. If the plants are alive, prune off any of the obviously dead material. Injured plants should be carefully cared for during the following growing season by applying water at weekly intervals when rainfall is not plentiful. When the plant shows signs of recovery, by making new growth, an application of fertilizer is in order.

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phone numbers. The pamphlets explain the species of the tree that's been planted, its proper and common name, why it was planted there, and how to take care of it and water it.

Metz is also receiving help from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources to do a free inventory of all the trees. Senior citizens will help number the trees and mark their location.

People are taking advantage of the tree program and assisting in Bowling Green. The same response comes from Lancaster, PA, which has its own adopt-a-tree program. Diane Williams, city arborist, says, "I think people appreciate trees a little more because of a concern for the environment."

The residents of Lancaster may purchase a two-inch caliper tree wholesale from the city and assume full responsibility after it is planted. "We do occasional fertilizing and spraying for insects, such as aphids, which were prevalent this summer," Williams says. Yet the funds don't exist for more than emergency aid on the privately owned trees.

The city used to plant 100 trees a season, but now only 40. "The people want it, they appreciate it more, yet it's one of the last things to get funding and the first to be cut. A lot of people still consider it an extra," says Williams.

John Van Vorst, supervisor of parks, Tenafly, NJ, knows that even if he gets additional funding it

won't be substantial as he is governed by a 5 percent a year increase. This year there was no increase. Van Vorst has found his own way to boost his revenue.

He receives about \$1,000 a year in firewood sales from wood that in the past would have been thrown away or put in a landfill. Trees recently downed by Hurricane David were cut and sold to residents. With this money he buys tulip bulbs, flowers, and other materials.

Autumn leaves put through a Royer shredder make a fine compost, which the park department sells to nurserymen and landscapers at \$5 a yard. These sales produce about \$2,000 a year. The city also saves by using the leaf compost instead of buying topsoil. Compost is free to all residents of Tenafly.

Van Vorst has saved dollars by planting many of his own flowers. "Anything that we're cost conscious about planting we try to breed from cuttings in our greenhouse," he says.

Other ways of cutting cost of maintenance include use of granular weed killers, such as Casoron, to eliminate hand trimming; Roundup on turf areas where grass is encroaching plant beds; and wood chips as buffer plantings. Van Vorst has cut his mowing schedule to every seven days for high use areas and every 10 days for low use areas.

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