

RECESSION OR NO RECESSION, THE TAXPAYERS APPROVED HIKE FOR AMHERST SCHOOLS

As the town of Amherst, NY begins to feel the pinch of the economic downturn prevalent in the western New York area, Herb Thurnherr superintendent of grounds for the Amherst Central School District, has tripled his budget in the two years since he took the job. Thurnherr has performed the unusual feat of getting the needed funds from a community that has experienced a mass exodus of the chemical and steel industries that once made the region prosperous.

Challenged with salvaging a landscape program that had fallen into neglect, he realized that public relations would be the name of the game. "I realized that the targets of my campaign should be the people who pay the bills, so I first approached the taxpayers rather than the school board," reasoned Thurnherr. Working through the PTA, he spoke directly to concerned citizens to further their understanding of the purpose of the grounds department. He succeeded in convincing them that a much larger budget was necessary, not only for a more attractive physical plant, but for the safety and recreation needs of their children.

Thurnherr emphasized subjects that citizens were sensitive about such as Title IX, requiring schools to provide equal athletic facilities for men and women, and the school's liability in cases of injury on the school grounds. The resulting pressure in the school board from citizens' groups, armed with sufficient information, brought about eventual budget alterations.

The increasing popularity of women's sports was one viable argument. As are most superintendents, Thurnherr is caring for athletic fields that now carry nearly twice the amount of traffic they did a few years ago. Games can no longer be moved to an empty field when the scheduled area needs

maintenance or is flooded by a heavy rainfall. Thurnherr explained that "the heavy use of athletic areas requires not only extra maintenance but we also had to install a new drainage system to keep all the fields usable at all times." A \$45,000 drainage system financed through a bond issue was recently installed as a result.

Liability of the school in cases of injury on the property is another issue Thurnherr has emphasized the importance of. To the citizens, keeping the school free from liability means keeping it free from large unexpected financial drains. To that effect, Thurnherr has enacted a police-enforced night curfew that has also reduced the amount of vandalism to the buildings and grounds.

Working with an annual budget of \$65,000, Thurnherr has been able to begin refurbishing the neglected lawn and athletic turf. One of his first objectives was to rid the lawns of an overwhelming weed and crabgrass problem using herbicides. He quickly found that he had another public relations problem on his hands. Close to the Love Canal and other well publicized chemical waste sites, the western New York residents were extremely sensitive about the use of chemical pesticides. Thurnherr went back to the PTA and negotiated a mutually acceptable schedule that would allow three days after spraying before students would be able to use the treated areas.

Located in a region famous for foul weather, snow removal itself is a major part of the job for Thurnherr and his crew. Heavy buildups of snow and ice must be removed religiously since an injury due to a slippery walkway could result in a major lawsuit against the school. Unfortunately, the consequences of indiscriminate use of salt and a buildup of snow are de-

stroyed plantings and wide swaths of damaged turf on either side of all walks and drives.

Consequently, the program for turf consists of a great deal of repair work. Large areas must be reseeded, fertilized and sprayed for weed control. Thurnherr and his crew of four groundsmen do most of the turf work themselves with the aid of three or four temporary personnel.

Most of the large projects are handled by in-house personnel. Thurnherr prefers to pool his staff and make use of the best use of his own staff before hiring professionals. Often a groundsman will be removed from his normal post to put his particular expertise to work on a problem, while his daily duties are taken care of by a temporary worker.

Thurnherr also gets as much from his equipment as possible. Thurnherr requires logs to be kept on all large pieces of machinery and pays close attention to the condition of the smaller items. He estimates that his stress on maintenance had added two or more years to the expected useful life of most of the equipment. Most of the preventative maintenance can be done by the employees, and repairs are very often taken care of in-house with the help of the school auto shop.

Problems that cannot be solved in-house are immediately sent to the distributor. At the end of each season, all equipment is promptly inspected and sent out for work, before being stored for the winter.

Like many school superintendents of grounds, Thurnherr came to his job via the buildings staff. Without a formal horticultural background, he relies heavily on the information provided by distributors and extension agents. Yet he feels his best resource remains the creativity with which he uses what is available.

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