

# FAMILY-OWNED MANAGEMENT FIRM MAKES SURE 3,000 TENANTS FEEL AT HOME AT THE HAMLETS

By THOMAS PACIELLO



A sample of The Hamlets 170 acres of developed landscape.

Residents moving from The Hamlets apartment complex in Alexandria, VA, typically fill out a questionnaire on their likes, dislikes, what they would have liked improved, etc. The majority list the grounds as one of the key reasons they liked The Hamlets. That is the highest compliment anyone could give Grounds Manager Charles Liebenow.

"I believe The Hamlets is unique in its emphasis on landscape maintenance," said Liebenow. "We believe that attractive grounds is one of the ways we attract and keep tenants." The Hamlets is owned and managed by Mark Winkler Management, a family-owned property management company. The property is approximately 350 acres, with 3000 garden apartment units on 170 acres. The remaining 180 undeveloped acres will be the site of a Radisson hotel and conference center and five office plazas.

The vision of Mark Winkler Management is to provide a self-sufficient community, similar to the nearby Crystal City. "We want people to be able to work, live and recreate within one-half square mile," said Liebenow. His maintenance crew is in many ways like The

Hamlets, a self-sufficient community. Crew size ranges from 35 during the summer to as little as 15 in the dead of winter. During the transition from the busy hot season to the slow cold season Liebenow solves his manpower problem through natural attrition. "People quit, are fired, don't want to work in the winter, go back to school or get a new job," he said. "We don't have a wholesale dumping of workers when the summer ends. We've never had to lay anyone off."

The maintenance assignments are divided into regular and high-impact areas. In the summer Liebenow runs two mowing crews that cut the complex on a 7-10 day cycle. Additionally, they edge the sidewalks and "weed-eat" the areas. The crew maintains the medians that run through the complex, although they belong to the city of Alexandria. "It would be silly to have the whole area look great and have overgrown, weed-infested medians," said Liebenow. "The medians reflect on our property."

Liebenow has his spraying incorporated into his mowing crew, differing from many managers who use separate spray crews. The foreman of the mowing crew does

all the spraying, which includes mulched areas, patios, mass plantings, parking lots and sidewalks. (The herbicide used is diquat, a formulation similar to paraquat.) "We found it was much more productive to have the foreman spray while he was running the mowing crew," said Liebenow. Come winter time the mowing and hedge trimming give way to mulching and leaf and snow removal. The entire property is mulched, every planting possible. Leaf removal is a very big job. The complex was built with the idea of leaving as many trees as possible, creating a tremendous leaf problem. As long as snow is not on the ground some crew members are picking up leaves.

High impact area maintenance pertains to places such as the shopping center, office plazas, flower beds, community club and rental office. These are the areas that will most likely be visited by prospective tenants and extra care is given to keep them properly maintained. They are administered on a seven day cycle and mowed every Friday (so they look good for the weekend visitors). Horticulturist Gary Lett has a crew of five men who pay special attention to the high impact areas. Lett plants a lot of annuals for color and rips them up after the first frost. The beds then lie natural until the planting season. While high impact areas require more fertilizer and herbicides, the hedges are allowed to grow in a natural form and receive less trimming than their residential relatives.

Keeping in line with being self-sufficient, Liebenow likes to do as much work in-house as possible. This has led him to experiment with numerous projects that other managers might have shipped out. "We do all the parking lot striping, some concrete and brick work, asphalt patching, stepping stones, walkways, a lot of retaining wall construction, and drainage work," said Liebenow. He stressed drainage

work, noting that The Hamlets has its share of water problems. "Keeping a lot of trees and natural areas is nice and attractive but it gives you a real maintenance headache down the road. Another reason for the water trouble is the lay of the land. We have buildings at different levels and some of the lower ones don't fair too well." Liebenow built a new board-on-board fence around one of the complex's three pools and rescreened the tennis court fences.

As new areas are developed he has been taking on more of the original landscaping chores. When Carnegie's (a Host restaurant) moved into The Hamlets, they contracted out their landscaping. "We told them it stank and offered to relandscape it," said Liebenow. "They agreed and we built some stone walls, sodded, moved plants and added some annuals." The new job looked great, Host acknowledged and now Liebenow is doing all the landscaping in the new office plazas. He has found that his crew has been up to the challenge of these light construction jobs. "We have one landscape forman that has a background in construction and that had helped," said Liebenow. "The jobs are not that complicated that you need a whole crew of trained construction workers."

He finds his best workers are those that are trainable and can do a lot of different things. The Hamlets' maintenance crew application form asks potential employees to note any training they have and what equipment they can operate. On the back of the application is a list of the work rules. After an employee is hired he is given the application back so that he has a list of the rules and can't plead ignorance if he screws up. "We strive to get rid of guys that don't produce immediately," said Liebenow. "We demand high quality and high productivity and we get it. There are a lot of guys who never show up for the second day of work but those who stay are very good workers." The maintenance office is centralized in the complex so there is a lot of supervision over the crew during the work day. From the office to any

site on the complex is only a five-minute ride. The crew is dedicated, with many men coming in before starting time to load their trucks. Working hours at The Hamlets are 7 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. and, according to Liebenow, "They put in a legitimate eight-hour day."

Liebenow's crew often receives praise from the tenants and they are instructed to treat tenant plantings with care. "People love to take the areas by their apartment and grow flowers and vegetables," said Liebenow. "Tenants are notified that they must border areas that they don't want sprayed and the crew is instructed to be on the lookout for small plants and gardens." Liebenow tries to discourage tenant gardens because their is a lot of turnover of tenants at The Hamlets. Some tenants make a good start in the spring only to let their gardens wane when their spring fever subsides. Another problem is having

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**"We want tenants to work, live and recreate here."**

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the new tenant not want to maintain the former tenant's garden and letting it be overrun with weeds. For old-time residents who are particularly vigilant in maintaining their gardens, Liebenow has his men give them special treatment to avoid spraying their flowers. "Most people, however, really don't feel the need to beautify the grounds because they are well-maintained and very nice-looking. We have a lot of trees, shrubs and flowers near the buildings."

Another reason for Liebenow discouraging tenants from planting gardens is that The Hamlets reserves a five-acre plot of land that is cut into 200 garden plots for tenant use. A disheartening note is that of the 120 or so plots that are occupied in the spring, less than 10 are still being maintained by the end of the summer. "But come spring time you had better have those plots available or the tenants will scream," said Liebenow. "We take great pains to prevent The Hamlet from

turning into a mishmash of private gardens. Dollar-wise it's also easier to maintain."

With the management structure at The Hamlets Liebenow does not have to submit a budget outlining all his purchases for the following year. "We have a free hand to purchase what we need within reason," he said. "Because we have been fiscally responsible in the past we don't get a lot of purchasing hassles. Items over \$500 such as spring/fall plantings, concrete work, equipment needs, special projects and payroll are all budgeted and need approval. Things like small equipment parts, chemicals, fertilizer, seed and compost can be purchased directly from my office." At the end of the year Liebenow submits a "Yearly Special" budget to management that consists of items that he has requested and not gotten and other items that he wish he had. One year his yearly special was a tree spade and it has proved to be an invaluable asset.

Liebenow's planting philosophy is to plant for immediate effect. In fact, many areas are overplanted so that not only is the immediate effect present but when the planting gets crowded the plants can be moved to other areas where they are needed. It is as if every new planting was a temporary nursery for future use. At The Hamlets the aim is to have year-round color, be it seasonal annuals or colorful perennials. In doing the plantings Liebenow uses a lot of compost, as much as he can lay his hands on. He is currently getting it free from a nearby plant but as landscapers continue to sing its praises, he believes that plants will start to charge for it. He is a strong supporter of compost, particularly in topdressing.

The Hamlets is a challenge for Liebenow. It has its problems. Many plants have outlived their useful plant life and need replacing and age is catching up to the older parts of the complex. (Some sections are 25 years old). But as long as tenants keep noting that the grounds is one of their main reasons for enjoying life at The Hamlets, Liebenow will accept the challenge of keeping it in shape. **WTT**