

Condo/apartment landscapes

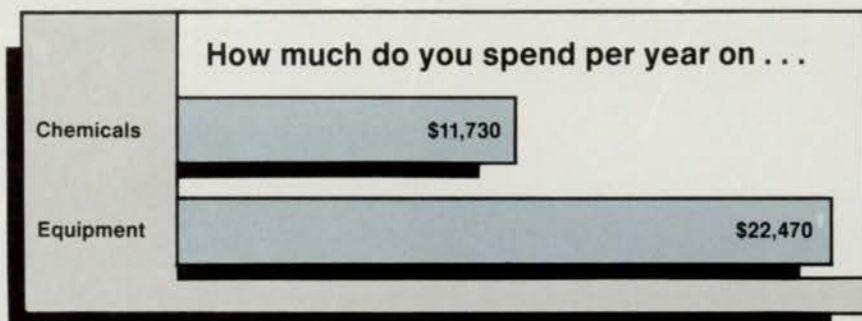
Increasing budgets can't help landscape managers conquer their number one problem: communicating with the customer.

The average condominium/apartment landscape manager saw his budget soar 10½ percent from 1985 to 1986, thanks at least in part to an increased perception among developers that a good-looking landscape will attract residents.

One respondent in a WEEDS TREES & TURF survey said that he thinks condo/apartment value increases by up to 25 percent with good landscaping.

The WT&T survey noted that budgets for those in condominium and apartment landscape management went from \$282,520 to \$312,140. Respondents also said that they will spend an average of \$11,730 each year for chemicals, and that they plan to spend an average of \$22,470 for equipment in 1986.

The key to putting that budget money to the best use? Over-



whelmingly, good communication with either the condominium association or apartment owner/manager. Other tips offered by respondents were:

- Treat all owners and renters the same. Don't do special favors unless you're willing to do them for everybody.
- Have a good knowledge of your grounds and profession, so that when management or the association asks for something you can tell them the feasibility of their request.
- Schedule in advance of upcoming events.
- Educate the customer concerning why the landscape was designed the way it was.
- Respond to complaints and queries within 24 hours.
- Define expectations of the owner/association.
- Conduct monthly site evaluations.
- Try to foresee problems before the management gets complaints.
- Make sure work is done on time and properly.

"You cannot keep them all happy," observed one condo landscape manager, "so keep the people in power happy."

The survey asked three specific questions of condo/apartment land-

scape managers, 25.6 percent of whom work for a landscape contractor and 28.2 percent of whom work for a property management company:

1) How likely is it that you will get maintenance work after the guarantee period of your installation expires?

2) From your experience, do condo owner associations appreciate the difference between professional quality maintenance and less professional seasonal bidders? and

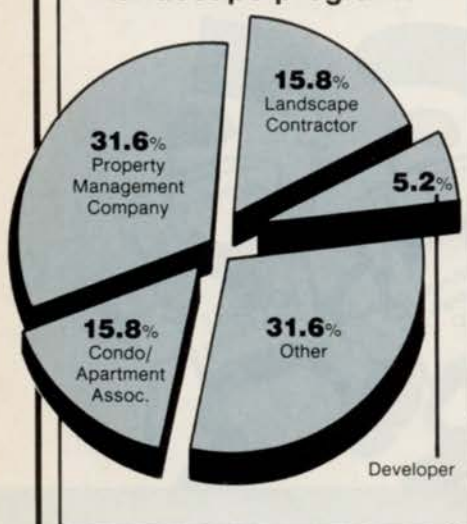
3) With condos, does the interest and budget in landscape maintenance decline after all the units have been sold?

Responses to the first two of those questions were overwhelmingly positive: 82.4 percent in the first and 73.1 percent in the second. Responses to the third question were, on the other hand, overwhelmingly negative with only 16 percent responding positively.

The typical condo/apartment landscape manager has eight small push mowers, four or five string trimmers, four or five spreaders, three or four large riding mowers, two or three turf spray units, and a couple tractors at his disposal. According to the WTT survey.

continued on page 28

Who specifies the landscape program?





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CONDO from page 26

Equipment ownership is divided almost exactly down the middle between the facility and the contractor, though contractors usually own tree movers and trenchers while the facility usually owns spreaders.

The average respondent in the WT&T survey is responsible for 114 condominium and/or apartment landscapes. In most cases (31.6 per-

By far, finding good personnel was the most-cited problem by respondents.

cent), the property management company specifies the program. Only about 16 percent of the time does the contractor himself specify the program.

Typically, groundcover and flower care is done by the facility staff while all other services are just about split down the middle.

By far, finding good personnel was the most-cited problem of undertaking the landscape maintenance of a condo property.

"We try to keep workers' morale up by trying to always promote from within, and by letting different workers try different jobs," said one person. "We also have bi-monthly meetings to discuss problem areas and explain different maintenance methods."

Another problem is the tight-fisted owner who doesn't care about the landscape, just the interior. "You've got to show that person that, the potential buyer's first judgement is based on what they see as they approach the building," a respondent noted.

"The biggest problem," another said, "is finding customers to remain with you after you have proven your worth and ability. Everyone is out for the Cadillac job with the Chevette price tag."

Other evident problems with condo contracting are developing a properly trained staff, site problem detection and correction, accounts receivable, and insurance and pesticide-related problems.

Statistics were obtained from 39 valid responses from a mailing of 150 earlier this year.

WT&T

Circle No. 109 on Reader Inquiry Card

Rocky Mountain moves

Denver's Tom and Becky Garber *touch* condo clients with landscape management techniques built around hard work and high tech.

by Ron Hall, associate editor

He's being eaten alive the hard way—from the inside out by the acid in his stomach. His nerves feel like somebody is dry shaving them with a rusty razor.

Meet the landscape contractor who makes his living dealing with condominium boards in the foothills of the Rockies.

"I left that meeting feeling miserable," says Tom Garber, recalling a memorable encounter with one board. "I was just shaking."

Meet Garber of the finely-trimmed Edwardian beard and the small-college linebacker build. Meet his partner, his wife of 15 years, Becky, a slender, stylish woman with a winning smile.

**'Becky, I just got
ran over by a
sod truck.'**

—Garber

He studied to be a college professor. She was a journalist.

Today they're owners of Denver-based Colorado Landscape Enterprises Inc. (C.L.E.). The five-year-old company employs 30, is approaching the million dollar club, and recently moved into a new 2,700-square-foot office. C.L.E. is tailored exclusively for town house and condo turf and landscape management.

Success for the Garbers doesn't come easy. It comes as a result of their



Tom and Becky Garber in front of Chimney Creek town house development in the foothills, one of the properties maintained by their Colorado Landscape Enterprises.

stubborn drive to learn from other industry leaders, the courage to test new ideas, and an almost fanatical desire to please.

It was this obstinacy (attention Guinness Book of World Records) that pushed Garber to sit through 15 homeowner association meetings in one month, sometimes two the same evening, sometimes on opposite sides of Denver.

C.L.E. has some other unique wrinkles.

"Becky, I just got run over by a sod truck," Garber remembers saying after dialing his wife from the wreckage of his car this summer after it had been flattened by a supplier's truck.

Car telephones

"Our entire operation is based on our communication system," Garber says. Clients and work crews are scattered over a 30-square-mile area.

"Silver Bullet" is Garber's car radio name, "Becky Base," his wife's. Then there's "The White Shadow" or "Red Rider" or "The Little Rascals," all C.L.E. employees. All are linked by a sophisticated cellular telephone network.

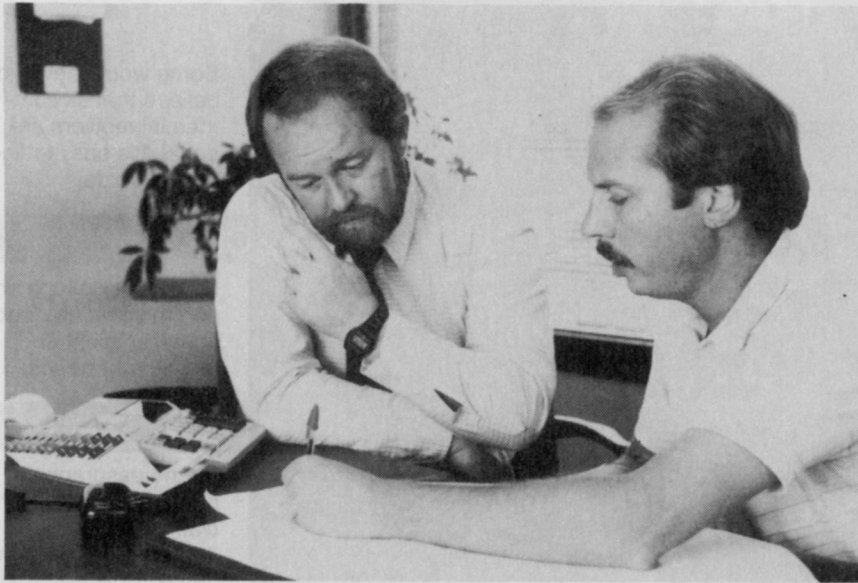
"High tech, high touch," Garber describes it. "Maybe our clients don't see us, but we'll be touching them every day."

And the Garbers want to touch their clients the right way. No long hair or earrings for the male members of C.L.E. landscape crews. "We hire the all-American

types," Garber says.

C.L.E. also touches its employees with a full-time client services manager. "We get 30 calls a day from our clients. If we didn't have the client services coordinator, these little jobs would end up on little scraps of paper."

Even so, Garber buzzes the perimeter of Denver daily, his car telephone



Tom Garber (left) reviews maintenance plans with property manager John Hammersmith.

at his hip. He's talking to clients, touching bases with property managers.

So why is Garber busting his buns?

Condo boards

"We basically start from scratch every year," he says. "Contracts are usually for 12 months."

Homeowner associations meet monthly to discuss common concerns, to determine who will collect their garbage, who will reroof their

'I can convince an association to get rid of any contractor'

—Hammersmith

units, who will maintain their grounds. Nine times out of ten they employ a property manager to hire the contractors, like C.L.E., they need.

It's a symbiotic (and sometimes mutually suspicious) triumvirate of interests. Change a few key members of the condo board, axe the landscape contractor. Switch property managers, boot the contractor.

Says Garber, "People in this business tell me that homeowner associations just don't make any sense. Even though you work your fanny off, they will drop you in a couple of years for whatever the reason."

John Hammersmith, vice president of a Denver-based property management company, fixes his icy blue eyes on the bottom line.

"I know I can convince an association to get rid of any contractor,"

he says. "Boards don't call me unless they have a problem. I've got to have the peace of mind that if I have a problem the contractor will take care of it. And the landscape contractor is the most important service we provide."

Hammersmith, fielding an average of 30 complaints daily, doesn't have time to mix sentiment with business.

It's no wonder that few landscape maintenance firms in Denver specialize in condos.

Says Garber, "while everybody else is running from condominium maintenance, we're running to it."

Garber listens

Garber took this stand after listening to an industry speaker at an Associate Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA) convention in Dallas three years ago. "I learned you have to carve your own niche. You can't expect to go head-to-head with the established firms in their specialties," he recalls.

Garber, who had started his landscape maintenance firm two years earlier "to survive, to pay a few bills," was already on his way to parlaying a 22-inch push mower, string trimmer, and edger into a successful business. But first he had to take a keener business interest in irrigation.

The Denver area is semi-arid. Landscape irrigation accounts for 50 percent of water usage. A drought his second year in business wiped out a season of maintenance. Clients dried up as landscapes withered.

His trouble-shooting sprinkler crew visits most sites daily now.

Denver's climate also pushed C.L.E. into snow removal. In addition to providing a winter cash flow, snow

removal allows C.L.E. to keep good workers year round. Emphasis is on walks. The main tool is a plastic shovel. When worn out, it's thrown away. Steel is too heavy. At Denver's altitude it would wear out workers in the brittle air of long nights.

Shovelers work six-hour evening shifts so that walks are clear by the morning rush.

Landscape management, sprinkler repair, snow removal—says Garber: "Suddenly we found ourselves with a corporation."

But, he points out, "I wasn't a businessman."

With a B.A. in English literature from Cal State at Fresno and an M.A. in theology from Chicago's Trinity Divinity University, his only business experience came from a short stint in Denver real estate.

Becky, with a similar educational background (degrees in English literature, history, and information management), put her journalistic aspirations on a back burner.

They immerse themselves in industry affairs and seek the advice of successful businessmen. Tom is on the board of directors of the Maintenance Division of ALCA. Becky is active in state and local industry associations. And they read. Trade publications. Books like *Megatrends* and *In Search of Excellence*.

This husband-wife team approach is being extended with C.L.E. now di-

'I learned you have to carve your own niche.'

—Garber

vided into three divisions: Turf Care, Sprinkler Management, and Special Services. Teams are assigned territories. Jobs are divided into 1/4- and 1/2-day projects. Crews work four-day weeks, Tuesday through Friday. The C.L.E. team's goal is to have each residential property as attractive as possible for weekends.

So, what are the payoffs for the Garbers and C.L.E.?

The most noticeable rewards are maintenance contracts averaging \$25,000 each (up from about \$10,000 just two years ago) and several long-term agreements with homeowner associations, C.L.E.'s first.

Of course, Garber admits, satisfied clients members and smiling property managers make those long evening condo board meetings a darn sight more enjoyable.

WT&T

Living on the Riverside

Like most Southern California cities, Riverside is experiencing unparalleled growth. So is its housing industry. That means good times for those in the condo and apartment landscape maintenance business.

by Ken Kuhajda, managing editor

Bob Pelikan of Pelikan Landscape Maintenance Inc. in Riverside has to be the only businessman in Southern California with an unlisted phone number. It's not that he's anti-social—he simply has all the business he and his five-man crew can handle. And then some.

Development is evident in every corner of Riverside, a traffic-jamless city that provides a refreshing contrast to the faster-than-the-speed-of-sound pace of Los Angeles and the beach cities.

Riverside is a babe, not mature, not yet a beauty, but ripe for the population boom it is experiencing.

It seems Bob Pelikan made the right choice several years ago when he gave up his desk job with the City of Riverside to maintain the turf and landscapes of condos and apartments.

It's a business he understands because he knows when to say "no" and when to submit a bid. Lately, he's said "no" more than its opposite. "I have just about all the business I need," says the bearded 48-year-old. "I don't want to get so large that I can't keep control over my work. I'm picky. I want to make sure it's done my way."

Most days, you'll see the youthful Pelikan out in the field with his young crew, directing the work yet pitching in at the same time.

He's responsible for the landscape



Bob Pelikan says he doesn't have the time to maintain his Riverside home/office like he once did. Nonetheless, it remains impressive, featuring an outdoor whirlpool and swimming pool.

maintenance of several apartment and condominium complexes with a combined total of 550 units in the Riverside area. It keeps him running but he's not slowing.

Rescue missions

One reason he can't let up is because he and his crew are often called in after another outfit has butchered a complex's landscape. "Grass cutters" have a bad name among the profes-

sional maintenance people in Riverside.

"There's an awful lot of grass cutters who call themselves gardeners," says Pelikan. "They buy a lawnmower, an edger, and a truck and they're in business. In this area, unemployment is high and someone who's unemployed knows he can cut grass. He goes into business." The results can be disastrous.

"They give others who are edu-



Riverside's Canyon Creek, featuring 128 units, is one of Pelikan's oldest clients.

cated and experienced a bad name. They come in not knowing the bidding process. They bid low, get the job, then we're called in to clean up the mess," he says.

But even after a condo association has seen the damage done by the "grass cutter," it may still be reluctant to shell out more bucks. It feels the bargain basement price of the grass cutter is normal. Enter Pelikan with his professional operation. And his professional overhead.

"I have to pay my taxes and maintain good insurance. Those costs are passed on to my customers," he says.

In order to maintain a good working relationship with condo boards, Pelikan relies on education. "Everybody's concerned about the dollar: they want to get the most for it," he says. "I think the important thing is educating people so they know what they're getting for their dollar.

"I know that often a management company will ask me to come to an association meeting and make it clear to them what they're getting for their dollar. They want to know why it costs so much to take care of an area," says Pelikan.

That's one part of the job Pelikan doesn't enjoy. "I get a little nervous and uptight because I'm afraid I'll get put on the hotseat," he says, half in jest. "At the same time, I try to form a good working relationship with the property manager or the committee person in charge of grounds. I find that very useful because they tell me when things aren't going right."

Green vs. brown

Part of Pelikan's educational process involves explaining why things don't stay green year round in sunny Southern California. Located 50 miles from the Pacific Ocean, Riverside doesn't feel the relative warmth the ocean breezes bring to the seaside in the winter. Winter nights can be downright cold.

'Taxes and insurance... costs are passed on to my customer.'

—Pelikan

"We try to grow a lot of cool-season grasses here. A lot of these condos want green grass year round. That's one of the problems I run into. People don't understand plants and seasons. In the winter time they think 'it's California, the grass should be green year round,' but you get the bermuda lawns and the St. Augustines and they all go dormant," he says.

The solution, not surprisingly, is to go with a bluegrass or a bermudagrass overseeded with a winter rye.

More often than not, the client goes back to a bermudagrass lawn anyway. "The experts tell us that in Southern California, sooner or later, you'll end up with a bermuda lawn. It does so well here," he says.

The predictability of Southern Cal-

ifornia weather makes Pelikan's job a little easier. Says Pelikan, "we know when it's going to rain. It allows us to schedule our maintenance better. Here we try to work around the heat, not the rain."

Irrigation scheduling is usually a simple process, but a vital one.

"We have not been treating water with the respect we should," says Pelikan. "There are not that many natives in landscape and the ones who are, who know the value of water, don't get heard—they're drowned out." He predicted a boom in the number of Southern California irrigation firms in the future.

30 years of changes

Bob Pelikan came to Riverside in 1956. Then a dot to Rand-McNally, Riverside had less smog then. Pelikan felt it was the perfect climate for a Missouri boy like himself. He stayed, married, and took a job with the city of Riverside Parks and Recreation Department.

His wife, Ann, earned her law degree in 1979 and passed her bar exam, allowing her husband the chance to start his own business. She assists her husband in contractual matters.

"I worked myself up too high (with the city of Riverside)," he says. "I'm basically an outdoor person and I found myself behind a desk doing time-management studies."

The years weren't foolishly spent. In fact, Pelikan says his experience with the city and time-management helps him now manage his business. "I have my crew really organized. They have it down to a routine so they know exactly what to do." Even so, employee turnover has been a problem. "Once they get really good, they go into business for themselves."

He has other problems. Dealing with the overplanted landscapes in Southern California is a headache. Last winter Pelikan removed over 100 trees from one of the developments he maintains. Not one resident noticed. He says he'll probably remove another 100 this winter.

And then there's the renters (and sometimes owners) who have little interest in the look of their landscape.

He stays away from commercial and private properties (he leaves that for the guy with the mower, edger, and one truck) and trees ("I consider tree trimming to be a field of its own").

He says his volume today is just where he wants it. Not bad for a guy with an unlisted phone number.

WT&T

Sam Knapp: he's never met a tree he didn't like

The first thing you notice about Sam Knapp of Riverside, Calif., is a piercing set of baby blue eyes. They don't miss much, especially when there's a tree in sight. Because Sam Knapp, operator of Knapp Tree Service in Riverside, is a man who knows and loves his trees.

He's one of just three certified arborists in Southern California. He's good at what he does. Bob Pelikan of Pelikan Landscape Maintenance says Sam Knapp is the lone tree trimmer he recommends.

"I leave it up to the experts," says Pelikan. "You just don't go out and get someone who says he's a tree trimmer because there's so many butchers out there. They just ruin trees. I feel very comfortable in recommending Sam."

If you hire Sam, be prepared to pay an above-average rate. Sam is the first to tell you he's not cheap. If you want him to make the initial call (he doesn't do estimates for free), it'll cost you \$25. The price rises to \$75 per hour for diagnostic counselling and consulting.

Earlier this year, a Riverside property management firm called for bids on a job where extensive tree work was needed. Sam's bid of \$16,000 was twice the bid accepted. "I tell the people straight up that I'm not cheap," says Sam, who drives a BMW.

"I don't give a bid for free, and I charge for every estimate. It's all over town: Sam thinks he's a doctor. It's true. I think it's a complement," he says with an ornery grin that deepens his ruddy complexion.

Simple approach

His approach to bidding is simple: don't call me unless you're serious about receiving the best service available. "I tell them 'don't waste my time and don't waste yours.' You'll find a dozen people in Riverside who love me," he says, not mentioning how the others feel.

Despite the showmanship, Sam Knapp is a likeable guy with a quick smile and a way of putting one at ease. He seems to have a saying for every situation. One of his favorites is "green begets green," which he says aptly describes much of Southern California.

But not necessarily Riverside. Many of Sam's accounts are located in affluent Orange County, where, he says, people are more willing to put up the "green." In other areas, the opposite is true.

"Not everyone is willing to spend the money (for tree care). Most don't allow a budget for it," he says. "Part of my job is to educate these people. Some think I'm there for my own pocket and I am—but I want to help their trees." In California, where an exotic palm carries an



Sam Knapp on a consultation call in Perris, Calif.

exotic price of \$25,000, a tree maintenance budget is a must, he says.

Sam says he works mainly through the large property management firms of Orange County, performing his specialty on apartments and condos. He also works on private homes.

But he gives back what he takes out. He's seldom refuses an invita-

'Trimming a tree is the hardest thing you can do. There's so many things that are critical.'

—Knapp

tion to speak at a seminar or garden club meeting. He's fair with his employees. They make from \$7 to \$15 per hour and are covered by a full medical plan. They have an extended production meeting each week where ideas for improving efficiency are discussed and then implemented. He listens to their suggestions.

It's a reward for what he considers hard work. "Trimming a tree is the hardest thing you can do. There's so many things that are critical," he says, adding that in an industry where there are good and bad artists, his are exceptional.

Overplanting

He sees overplanting as a major problem in the "now" society of Southern California.

"People here want an immediate affect," he says. "They overplant, don't institute a management program, don't remove as needed, and the results are usually disastrous." He sees the problem deepening as youthful California matures and housing increases.

He says another area of concern is the trend toward cool-season foliage, plants that need special care in Southern California. Most aren't aware of the subtleties involved in raising such plants.

"With our summers, you have to be careful with whatever you plant. We've adapted our treatment," he says, to mesh with the unique climate. He says he treats trees in desert-like Riverside County different from those in Orange County.

But he treats them all with respect. "A lot of clients I deal with tell me, 'we bought the house because of the trees.' Trees take a lifetime to come into existence, and I think people are respecting that more and more."

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Living on the Riverside

continued

Riverside's development creating attractive market for property management companies

Joe Gonzales doesn't calculate the hours he labors each week making a success of Riverside's Jordan Realty. "If I did, I'd realize I'm only making \$3 an hour," says the bearded California native, who serves as company president.

He's making a little more than that. For Riverside, ripe with development dollars, is an excellent area for the property manager.

As the property values in Los Angeles and Orange Counties increase, look for an even greater exodus to Riverside and adjacent San Bernadino Counties.

Just the thought of all those people brings a smile to Gonzales' tan face.

The largest development he manages is 136 units but look for that figure to increase as the company grows.

Jordan Realty is involved almost exclusively in property management. The company manages 20 homeowner associations in greater Riverside. "We don't deal in sales although we're licensed to sell. We don't though, because it can be a conflict of interest," says Gonzales.

As the property values in Los Angeles and Orange Counties increase, look for an even greater exodus to Riverside...and San Bernadino Counties.

He says very few realty companies are exclusively into property management but "we have our competitors."

For Joe Gonzales the time he spends at homeowner association board meetings, sometimes two in one night, is well worth it.

"I meet with each of them once a month," he says, noting communi-



Joe Gonzales, Jordan Realty Co. Inc., Riverside, Calif.

cation is paramount to a good property manager/homeowner board relationship.

Dealing with associations is a relatively new experience for Gonzales. The Vietnam veteran worked in newspaper ad sales, and boat and cigarette sales before gaining his real estate license in 1979. He joined Jordan Realty, then headed by Elwyn P. "Bud" Jordan, the same year, became a partner in July 1984, and took over as president when Jordan retired on Dec. 31, 1984.

Gonzales has since taken on a new partner.

Meanwhile, Riverside's Weldon Brown Co. Inc., another property management company, is also prospering in the high-growth area.

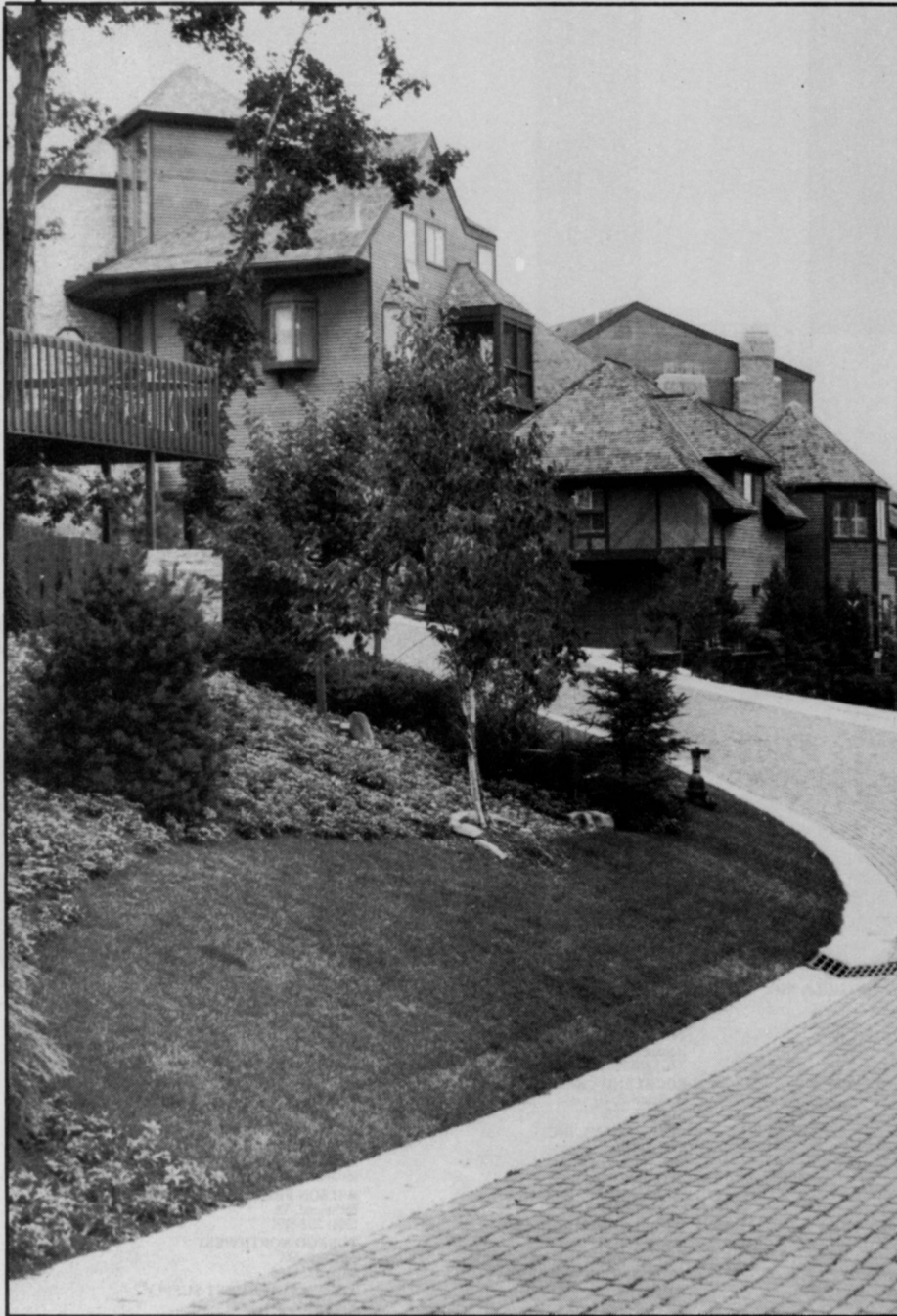
"This is a growth area in real estate," says company vice-president Jim Furlong, a 30-year real estate veteran.

Weldon Brown has been in property management for 20 years, servicing Riverside and surrounding areas.

"This is a good business to be in right now because of the large amount of investment money in the area," says Furlong. In the future, he says, "there's going to a need for more good management firms." □

Shore beautiful

Cashelmara, a beautiful condominium development on the north coast of Lake Erie, maintains design integrity despite personal preferences of the people living there.



Cashelmara in Bay Village, Ohio.

The seed was planted about three years ago. The result? A beautiful \$300,000 landscaping plan for Cashelmara—Stone House by the Sea in Bay Village, Ohio.

The plans for landscaping Cashelmara, the \$30 million, 110-unit development stretching nearly 13 acres along the Lake Erie shoreline just west of Cleveland, were developed when designer/architect Robert Corna visualized a design that would enhance an already beautiful site.

He decided to keep the natural wooded theme and make the property flow evenly throughout the development, while at the same time giving the unit owners their personal effects. The theme would call for just the proper combination of trees, shrubbery, and ground cover to make up for the area cleared away for construction.

Tree and shrubs

Working with a hilly, rolling terrain, they used about 400 trees which are expected to achieve the original wooded effect in the next five to ten years. They used three-inch caliber, 12- to 15-foot black locust trees. Other tree combinations included 6- to 15-foot white and Austrian pines, 5-foot Canadian hemlocks and plenty of flowering dogwood. Pine oak, sugar maple, and Norway maple were also planted to gain rapid shade cover. So, in about 10 years, evidence of the original construction will have disappeared.

Shrubbery was also used to produce the overall wooded concept Corna's crews had originally planned. They planted 250 white and lavender rhododendrons, 300 azaleas, 75 viburnum, and some red twig dogwood, each between three- and five-years old and 36 to 40 inches tall.

English ivy and purple leaf winter creeper, selected for their appearance and erosion control capabilities, were

continued on page 66

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SHORE *continued from page 66*

used as ground cover on the slopes and hills.

The No.1 problem

One of the most difficult assignments in laying out the landscaping plan was to meet individual owners to deal with their preferences for personalized courtyards while remaining true to Cashelmara's overall design theme.

Each courtyard was designed with the owner in mind and based on concepts developed after meeting with each to discuss walkways, steps, and the planting effect. While the owner might prefer an Oriental or formal

Each courtyard was designed with the owner in mind.

garden, the landscape plan still introduced the overall effect while adjusting to fit the owner's needs by planting hedges of azaleas or Japanese rhododendrons.

In addition, the steep rolling hills made it necessary to build retaining walls of gray field stone, so more than 5,000 railroad ties were integrated into the property's design.

By phases

The landscape concept called for Cashelmara to be handled in phases and, as six buildings were completed, the crews then moved in and cleared off the property, graded, regraded, and planted. While moving on to six new building areas, they would be maintaining the back six.

Corna is also considering the installation of a Leaky Pipe underground irrigation system. Because of the complexity of Cashelmara's terrain—the landscape beds, wood decks, and close living quarters—above-ground watering systems are considered an impossibility. Conventional spray systems are unable to direct their flow to exact locations while the capillary action from within the Leaky Pipe system directs and controls water flow.

With Cashelmara, Robert Corna and Associates and Cashelmara Company appear to have pulled off the impossible: maintaining the integrity of a large multi-family landscape while serving the peculiarities of individual clients.

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