

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."

WT&T

SPRAY
HOSE WON'T
FIGHT BACK
WHEN IT'S ON
A HANNAY
REEL

Are you still manhandling clumsy spray hose? Hauling, dragging... stopping to fight kinks and tangles? Get Hannay Reels and put spray hose in its place.

- Pay out smooth and easy.
Wind up straight and fast.
- Greater range.
Better control.
- Neat, convenient hose storage.
- Less wear and tear on you and the hose.

Specify Hannay Reels for all your spraying operations. Send today for free literature packet.



**HANNAY
REELS**

CLIFFORD B. HANNAY & SON, INC., 600 EAST MAIN STREET
WESTERLO, NEW YORK 12193 • TELEPHONE (518) 797-3791

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." □