LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT
INCORPORATING LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

'Right-sizing': worth the risk?

The key to effective money and resource management is vision, says this veteran county groundsman.

■ Jeff Bourne's landscaping budget was $6 million in 1989, but just $4 million last year—a cutback of 33 percent in three years. Thus, he had every reason to speak on "Doing More with Less" at the Professional Grounds Management Society's annual meeting last year.

"We're making priority selections about how we can do more with less," noted Bourne, who is maintenance chief for the Howard County (Md.) Department of Parks. "You have to create a situation to maintain a certain look, but you have to do it more effectively."

Bourne says that the popular term in business has been "down-sizing" to describe cutbacks in manpower and finances—but the proper term might be "right-sizing." That is, having the right number of people and other resources to adequately meet your goals.

"You need to establish a goal to describe what is acceptable," he notes, "then evaluate priorities and decide to work with alternatives.

"You've got to get yourself and your staff thinking about these alternatives. You make selective decisions in a number of areas. And you've got to involve middle managers in making these decisions.

"Part of the decision-making process is defining function and creating lists of resources, " he notes.

"The essential element is determining your current costs and finding substitutes.

"The key to the whole thing is vision: seeing alternatives that we may have never seen before."

Here are some ways Bourne's department is doing more with less, with some additional suggestions added by his PGMS audience:

1) adapting a more natural look, thus decreasing maintenance demands;

2) collecting leaves less frequently;

3) renovating less turf in low-use areas;

4) renting pavilions to generate dollars;

5) letting secondary vegetation grow up to enhance wildlife areas in the parks;

6) getting single-shred pallets for free instead of purchasing mulch; using double-ground instead of bark mulch;

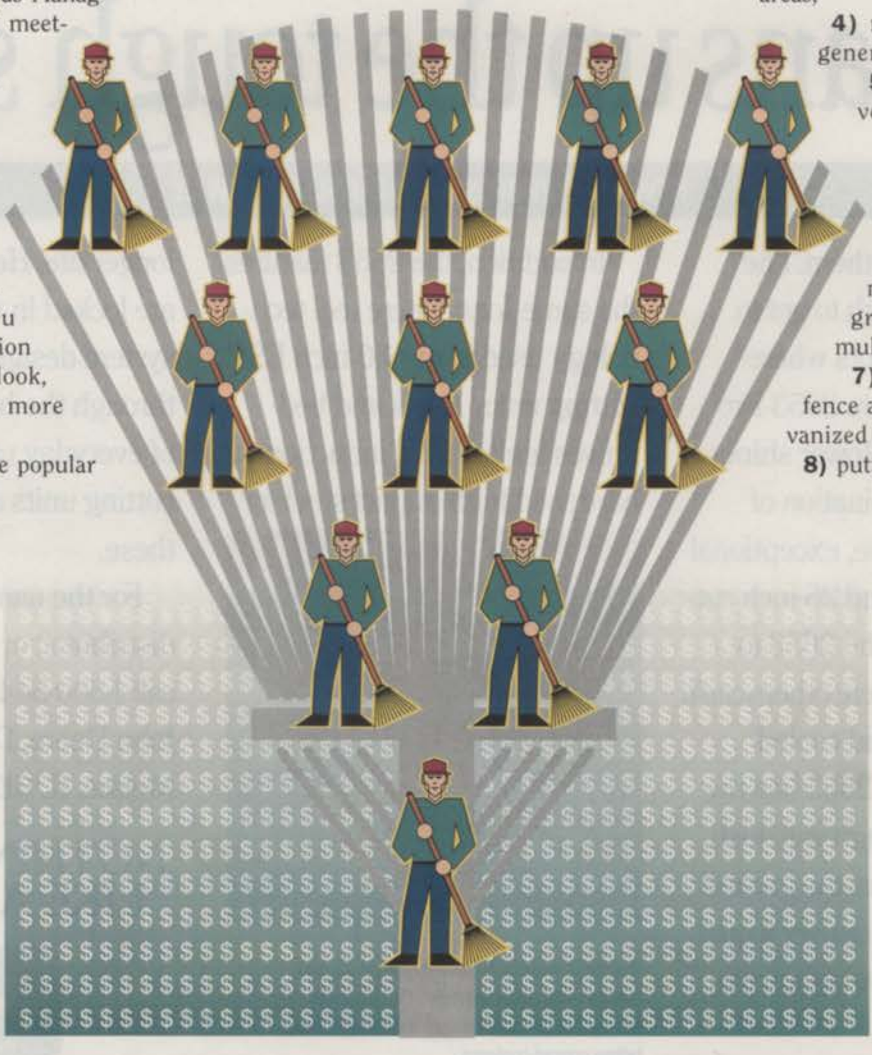
7) eliminating coated fence and going back to galvanized pipe fences;

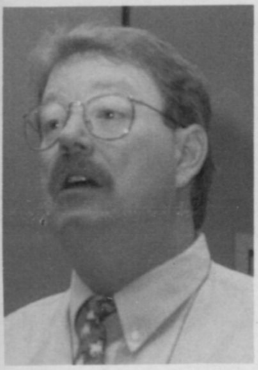
8) putting an extra gallon of paint in athletic field striping mixes to get two additional weeks of stripe life;

9) alternative plantings in transition areas to eliminate mowing, which is the most expensive maintenance task;

10) re-designing and renovating areas that are expensive to maintain;

11) using larger mowers where feasible, and creating mowing strips;





Bourne: 'It's a whole new awakening for us in the public sector to be customer-driven.'

12) researching tasks: a video tape study cut mowing of one area from 1-3/4 days to 3-1/4 hours by using different equipment and crew configuration;

13) using the Boy Scouts to install paths as a community service (he suggests using condominium associations and neighborhood associations, too);

14) educating the customer or consumer as to what maintenance is appropriate; and

15) leasing land to local gardening enthusiasts so they can maintain it.

It may be a sad fact, but it's a fact of life indeed, that landscape management in the '90's will mean being more efficient and "doing more with less."

Using your imagination may help you not only survive, but thrive, in the decade of the '90's.

—Jerry Roche

'Flex-force' idea works for Delaware company

■ Larry Iorri was motivated to downsize his company eight years ago, when he realized it wasn't fun anymore.

President of Down to Earth, Inc. in Wilmington, Del., Iorri says he returned to the shop at the end of a day and noticed a number of things "out of place." He sensed a lack of appreciation from the crew, and realized he was spending a lot of time and effort and getting little in return. The business was doing well, but he was working as hard as he had been 20 years ago.

It was then that Iorri decided to downsize his company in a way that would keep it profitable and productive. The plan took five years to implement, during which time he:

- converted the eight full-time and 10 part-time work force into a part-time "flex-force," with one full-time supervisor;
- lowered the volume of work done by the in-house force;
- earned higher profit margins on each job, and was still able to maintain high quality work; and
- switched from two- to three-year contracts.

The flex-force is split into two wage divisions: a $9- to $14-per-hour force and one that is paid between $4.50 and $6 per hour. Clothing allotments are across the board.

Iorri is generous with salary increases in both wage brackets. "If I get somebody who's a great worker," he says, "I'm going to pay him well to show I appreciate him. Why should I try to save a couple thousand dollars a year by not giving (good raises)? That person ends up making me money, and I don't have to retrain him!"

Iorri's crew members are between 30 and 72 years old. They have one thing in common: strong motivation to work, primarily families.

"I realized that my best guys were always older, and had a lot of responsibilities," says Iorri.

Those of his crew who are not retired all hold full-time jobs, which takes care of their insurance and health care. There are no paid holidays for Iorri to worry about, and vacation pay is related to the number of hours each man works each week. For instance, an eight-hour-a-week employee gets eight hours of vacation pay. He pays less Social Security tax, less federal unemployment tax, and less liability insurance.

All employees benefit from the company profit-sharing plan.

Is it working? Iorri says he hasn't lost a man in eight years, and estimates that the entire crew has missed about five days in eight years.

Iorri feels as if he has incorporated a genuine team approach, thanks to the crews' positive work ethic and flexible schedules.

'Satellite substitutes'—These Iorri innovations are people who handle accounts with multiple locations—such as a bank or realty company—located at greater distances from the office. Iorri sets them up with the equipment, and they take it from there.

Iorri: No health insurance costs with part-timers.

Iorri says he now has enough flexibility to sub-contract mowing, big mulching jobs, weeding and larger chemical applications. Size of job and geographic location are taken into consideration when choosing a sub-contractor.

His company handles lawn renovations, aeration, pre-emergence weed treatments, and athletic field jobs

A man who's bursting at the seams with ideas, Iorri has a few other tricks up his sleeve, designed to keep busy and promote the company:

- selling his services as a design consultant to homeowners, competitors and institutions such as hospitals;
- advertising "winter pricing" and off-season pricing to get customers locked in for the spring and summer;
- acting as a service broker. If a client wants a service done that Iorri can't handle, he'll do the legwork, secure a supplier for the service, and pocket a fair finder's fee (10 to 20 percent of the price of the job);
- acting as a third-party arbitrator in legal disputes; and
- concentrating on finding service niches that require one man and one piece of equipment.

Iorri suggests that the decision of whether or not to downsize depends on the stage your business is in. It might not work for a company just starting to grow, but could be just the ticket for an intermediate size company, or one whose owner is planning to retire soon.

—Terry McIver