

# Community relations rescue sinking maintenance budgets

**Your publicly-funded landscape management budget can be spared the wrath of state and city number-crunchers.**

by Bob Milano  
University of California, Davis

■ Many public sector services throughout this country have felt the impact of a wild and unpredictable budget axe swinging in all directions.

In response, we've had to focus on strategies to deal with the damage. But have we focused on the correct strategies and made the right choices?

We've adapted quickly to the budget reductions by decreasing service levels, cutting capital programs, deferring hiring, scaling back equipment replacement and eliminating administrative overhead. In our haste to meet the pressing, operational demands to care for the landscape, did we many times fail to consider our responsibilities to our customer, the community?

Now is the most important time to keep in touch with customers. We have a responsibility

- to increase awareness about the importance of the resources we manage;
- to expand our efforts to educate, inform and reach out to our communities; and
- to provide accurate information about the service we provide and the resources we manage.

If we do our job well, I believe our budget levels can be maintained—even expanded—through vocal public support and recognition for our programs.

**The big picture**—As we all evaluate our priorities for the demands of each day, we should strive to remain aware of the critical, yet rarely pressing, requirements of good community relations.

In most public sector facilities, budgeting is determined by an elected board or appointed committee that is

held accountable by the community at large. With this in mind, you easily can see why community relations are an important and critical element of any public sector landscape program.

In most instances, I would suggest that those of us managing public facilities have three broad areas of responsibility:

- maintenance;
- capital improvements; and
- community relations.

All three are extremely important. But are enough resources being allocated toward the community relations component in your program?

Community relations include all of the daily interactions between maintenance workers and facility users as well as more formal events such as new park dedications with the city council.

The performance of your organization can be relayed effectively to your governing body through staff reports and briefings. But input from your customers and the community in general, good or bad, is frequently regarded most highly by the decision makers.

Before venturing out with any new public relations programs, you should clearly explain to your staff why community relations are important and why it is necessary to allocate resources toward the effort. Encourage everyone to interact with the

community and answer questions about the work they are doing or projects under way.

Personnel must understand that they are a vital part of the community relations program, and that the type of one-to-one grassroots public relations they can provide can be the most effective and long lasting.

**Reaching out**—The next step includes reaching out to the community that you serve. You might break your customers into three groups and target specific outreach and education efforts toward each.

**1) Direct facility users** such as organized soccer, baseball and softball leagues, swim teams and garden clubs have a high stake in your operation and should be targeted first. You might meet with the leaders of these groups on a regular basis to discuss service needs and educate them about various issues.

Let them know that you care about their needs and are willing to work with them to accomplish their goals. Solicit their support. Welcome their volunteer efforts and contributions and their willingness to marshal support for the facilities.

**2) Affiliated parties**, such as those that may live next to a busy park, or parents whose children go to school at your facility, could be targeted. Outreach and education about your services and programs could be included as part of larger newsletters or articles in the local newspaper, for example.

**Get involved. Here, a representative from UC Davis and nearby communities plant trees in a cooperative effort.**



3) **The general community** should be targeted with well publicized programs, events and accomplishments. Local papers, posters in visible locations and mailers could be used to distribute educational and outreach information. Not only will these efforts reach the entire community, but they will lend recognition and credibility to your program in the eyes of the budgetary decision makers.

An effective, broad-range outreach program also will validate the importance of your services and increase the enthusiasm of both the staff involved in the programs and of your key supporters.

**Act now!**—Start today with a new attitude and commitment toward community relations. Encourage interaction with the public. Promote volunteerism and help coordinate volunteer activities to accomplish clearly-defined goals. Involve facility users in decisions.

Be visible, with speeches at local schools and

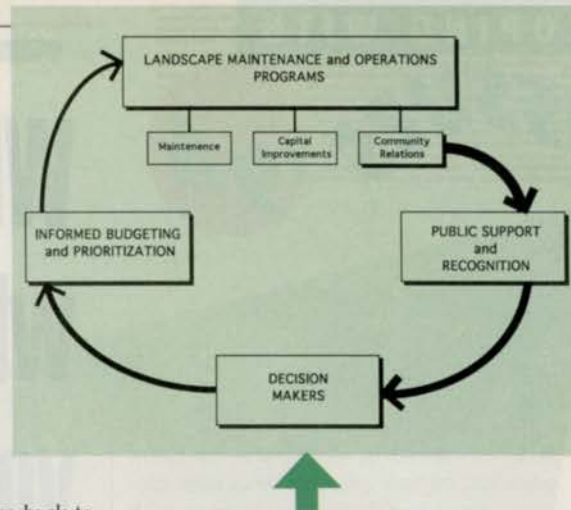
community service clubs, or sponsor tree plantings.

Keep news of your company out there, with a calendar of events and progress reports on special projects. Publicize your successes through local newspapers, radio and TV stations.

If we believe in the work we do, we need to come out of the woods and into the clearing to educate and inform our clients so they can then make informed decisions.

If we are successful, we can turn back to the community and ask for their assistance by putting down the budget axe.

—The author is grounds operations manager for the University of California, Davis, physical plant, and a past board member of the National Sports Turf Managers Association.



**When community relations works, you get support from the public decision makers. Explain the need for continued landscape management programs.**

# Beware public perceptions



by James E. Guyette

How pesticide applications are perceived by the public is an issue that should be addressed daily, says Dr. Bill Pound, turfgrass research associate at Ohio State University.

Fears can be abated and clients better served by taking more care in avoiding high drift situations, Pound says.

"As we get into lower-volume applications, drift becomes more of a concern," reports Pound, who conducted a seminar sponsored by the Associated Green Industries of Northeastern Ohio.

When smaller chemical tanks are carried onto properties, there's a tendency to increase the sprayer pressure to compensate, notes Pound. This sends out smaller droplets that are oh-so-eager to blow into unwanted areas. A 2 gal./1000 sq.ft. mixing ratio that includes larger droplet sizes will help reduce the risks.

In addition to needlessly alarming and offending your customers' neighbors in a rift over drift, haphazard spray patterns will invite horticultural problems down the road that may remain hard to detect.

"Drift injury is not always described as death to the plants," Pound explains. A once-viable shrub or flower that presents puzzling aspects of illness can in reality be a

victim of a previous encounter with just a slight amount of drift.

"This is injury without actually hitting the plants," says Pound. The problem is aggravated when turf managers treat during hot weather or high winds. Always check droplet size. If a drift dilemma develops, stop treatment that day.

"If we get into any media hype for 1994, it will be related to exposure," he says. A prime target could be phenoxies, especially 2,4-D. "Phenoxies are phenoxies to people who don't know better. The president will come after something to appease the environmentalists—and everyone's heard of 2,4-D."

Pound remembers the Alar alarm. "They were tough on apples, and they can be tough on us," Pound warns. The core of the concerns was later

declared to be disproportionate to the actual danger, but the damage was done.



**Pound: 2,4-D a potential community relations problem.**

"It's a sitting duck," Pound says of 2,4-D. "At this point the research is inconclusive and the homeowner doesn't know what to think," he notes.

While research points out that 2,4-D is not an especially persistent material in turf, the issue of long-term exposure lingers. "That's what they're trying to decipher right now," Pound reports.

Another potential perception problem can be brought about by the use of glyphosate when spot treating for weeds. Television commercials have been targeted at homeowners, and they are encouraged to get out on the lawn and start squirting away.

"It will control that broadleaf weed, but you will have a brown spot," he cautions. "We don't need Roundup to spot treat for broadleaf weeds—we have the phenoxies for that," Pound points out.

And for all the public concerns over pesticides, Pound ponders, there's still an ongoing consumer reluctance to opt exclusively for organics. "Usually they're priced a lot more expensively," he observes. "The organic fertilizers are still on peoples' minds," he notes, but "they try the organic program and they get broadleaf weeds."

—James E. Guyette was managing editor of *Lawn Care Industry magazine*. He is now a freelance writer based in South Euclid, Ohio.