

Lighting it up

Contractors pool talents to give big GE property in NY ecologically sound landscape

BY GEORGE WITTERSCHEIN

General Electric Corp.'s decision to upgrade an aging industrial plant in upstate New York has turned out to be a win-win-win — for the environment, for General Electric and for landscape contractors involved in the work.

"We want to do whatever we can to make our employees feel good about their work environment," says Craig W. Radliff, facilities manager in Schenectady, headquarters of GE Energy Products, where the company manufactures steam turbines and generators.

Major renovation

During the last decade some of the older landscapes had been removed and others renovated, adding space, turf, trees and flower beds to greet visitors at the entrances. GE also invested in a state-of-the-art health center, a new dining facility, recreation fields and a half-mile cinder track for employees.



Numerous contractors turned the GE industrial site into a park-like campus.

GE is pleased with the results, Radliff says. Although it's difficult to do a quantitative measurement of the impact of the site upgrade, the benefits of the campus-like atmosphere and other improvements are appreciated by employees and draw positive comments from guests. The National Arbor Day Foundation recognized the environmental makeover with a Project Award.

Also pleased are the landscape professionals who worked on the site upgrade. They report that the projects were profitable for them, and in some instances that they deepened their relationship with

General Electric and earned themselves other business. Besides, they feel being part of the broad ecological trend is a positive step for the Green Industry.

One of the contractors, Jim Catella, an engineer and general manager at The Clark Companies, feels his company's work on the GE Schenectady campus was financially successful, roughly coming in within its usual profit guidelines. The Clark Companies, based in Delhi, NY, is a 53-year-old construction company that specializes in athletic field construction. The company, employs about 70 and has built or reno-

Is being ecologically sensitive good for landscape companies?

ated sports fields for the New York Giants and New York Jets football teams, the Olympics and a number of universities in the Northeast. When the firm got a call from General Electric it was in for a new experience — doing athletic field work for a major corporation.

Lots of work ahead

GE, it turns out, had a substantial amount of work in store for The Clark Companies. The athletic fields for the Schenectady plant site included softball fields, tennis courts, volleyball courts, horseshoe pits, bocce courts and soccer fields. "These were fully irrigated, and we put in the irrigation," says Clark's Catella. "We also put in 14 acres of sodding."

Another company involved in the work at the site was Pakatar Landscaping, owned and operated by brothers John, Thomas and James Pakatar. The Waterford, NY-based company, which grosses about \$500,000 in revenue a year with mostly commercial customers, performed a lot of the installation and planting work for GE Schenectady. "We were invited to bid on the GE job as a result of a referral from our landscape architect," says John Pakatar. The result has been several years' worth of work at the site, most of it installation.

"Basically, the plantings have been native material," Pakatar says. "We use Norway spruce and Canadian hemlock, for example, red maples, Douglas firs...and we put in 700 evergreens along a railroad cut that separates the office railroad area from the perimeter of the office complex and parking lot. That includes balsam firs, Douglas fir and Austrian pines."

Gary DeLuke, CEO of White Birch Nurseries, Inc., a 50-year-old company started by his parents, also feels he did well by the project. It fell to DeLuke to submit a design, especially for trees, that would help turn the industrial site into

Jim Catella, Clark Companies: "I would say yes to that question. We've bid on and performed other ecologically sensitive projects. We've been involved with the construction of wetlands and habitats, both for the State of New York and for private customers who got an approval to build somewhat on wetlands. To get approval they had to agree to create new wetland elsewhere. Much of our work involves seeding and mulching and sodding and erosion control. The first and last thing we always do on a project is provide for erosion control measures, and stabilize the site, and then remove those measures at the end after everything is stabilized.

"Everybody in this industry is in an ecologically sensitive business, whether they know it or not" he says.

"Our industry as a whole is evolving in that direction," adds John Pakatar. "We've built a niche business, namely commercial installation, and ecological concerns are becoming a noticeable element in that niche. If ecology is an important part of your niche, you owe it to yourself to develop expertise and a good reputation in that area."



About 700 evergreens were installed between a railroad area and the GE office complex.

something more like a park or campus. "I think they enjoyed the design," DeLuke says. "We won the job." DeLuke says GE managers did much of the tree selection while fellow contractors installed many of the trees.

Everyone was motivated

DeLuke claims that the GE work was profitable for his firm because it kept his employees motivated about their work and their role in its success. Plus, he has a unique self-designed program to keep his employees informed and motivated about their work and their role in the company's profitability. "As a result, we get very productive and efficient work from our people," he says.

The company also got a lot of positive exposure at the GE campus, resulting in more work elsewhere. "People who work in the offices there saw us, and some of

them gave us residential work on their own homes," DeLuke reports.

White Birch is an ecology-minded company to start with, leaning away from pesticides and chemical fertilizers and towards organics. "The pesticides and chemical fertilizers are getting harder to use anyway," says DeLuke. "Everybody has to be certified to use them and you have to notify everybody and his brother, all of which cuts down on your profits."

DeLuke also likes to minimize his impact on the environment by choosing trees appropriate for the northerly Schenectady climate. "I try to use plant material that's going to require the least amount of maintenance and still look good. I've become something of a zone five expert." **LJM**

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