



THE PRICE IS RIGHT

The new look uses clean and washed river stone. The old look (inset) hides houses behind older, declining trees.

A contractor uses innovative financing to land a project other companies might have had to take a pass on.

BY **CURT HARLER**

Sometimes, having too much business can be a challenge, too. That's the situation that faced Kevin Winkler, project manager at #1 Landscaping, Medina, OH. #1 Landscaping signed a contract with the Valley Creek Homeowners Association (HOA) to re-landscape about a dozen properties this past spring. When neighbors saw how well the job was going, others hopped on board. Soon, the job had grown to two dozen properties.

Enough was enough. Winkler had to put the brakes on other homeowners who clamored to get on board: A third phase was scheduled for this fall.

Time for a change

When the Valley Creek allotment was designed as part of a planned community in Strongsville, OH, some 40 years ago, the

INNOVATIVE PRICING



Ron Bostaph waters plantings. Even with a blazing hot summer, they had fewer than 5% failure with the establishment. Most of those that did not make it were maples.



architect, Bob Schmidt, did an award-winning job of planning landscape features. The area is highly xeriscaped, which is unusual in an area with the 40-in. rainfall a short drive from Lake Erie. Trees and shrubs were designed for minimal maintenance.

Over the years, however, trees grew and shrubs bushed out. Coming into 2009, the homeowners at Valley Creek knew something needed to be done.

“We’ve worked in the area for over 20 years,” says Tom Csanyi, president of #1 Landscaping. In that time, he adds, the area matured. Some property owners did not do a lot with the original landscaping.

“Updating a project like this is a big (financial) hit for a homeowners association,” Csanyi says. “It’s a big nut to crack to do the finances and get everyone on the same page.”

What makes the Valley Creek Association project so successful is an innovative payment plan worked out between the HOA Board and #1 Landscaping. While many landscapers are reluctant to deal with homeowners’ associations, the deal Valley Creek developed could serve as a model of how to negotiate successfully.

Financing the job

“We had never had a special assessment for our homeowners, and I didn’t want to be the first,” says Ron Bostaph, president of the Val-

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Skipping cleanups saved money and let the HOA offer members a \$500 rebate.

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ley Creek HOA. “Doing it the way we did it made it work for everyone.”

Bostaph says he was reluctant to tell everyone to fork over a couple thousand dollars for landscaping. Instead, he came up with a strategy that included dropping the planned fall and spring cleanups the seasons before the project began, having the HOA pay for removal of the mature and dying trees, and refunding each homeowner \$500 for the work done on their properties.

Bostaph admits the landscape “didn’t look real good” for a while after they skipped the cleanups. However, the cost savings allowed the HOA to offer each association member a \$500 rebate once they got the job done on their property.

Tree removal cost the HOA \$280 to \$300 a tree, and was necessary because many huge conifers suffered canker. Because the same landscape contractor did all the work, the cost of preparation was minimal.

“The way we did this project allowed us to

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leverage a lot of time and design work,” says Csanyi. “For a small amount of money, the association got a lot of impact.

“Many communities will be in a similar situation,” Csanyi continues. “They need to come up with a game plan and be proactive before they start losing trees — or having people go off and do their own thing. It was

“With the \$500 back, it was a no-brainer.”

— TOM CSANYI, PRESIDENT, #1 LANDSCAPING

good for us since it was done in volume. It was good for the residents the way the financing was set up.”

Too many landscapers shun multi-family projects because the financing gets complicated. Personalities get involved. Seniors on fixed incomes complain when they are required to pay money they would rather spend elsewhere. Other residents want to see their HOA money spent on other tasks, like painting.

“To get everyone to buy into the project, the HOA gave people \$500 from the general fund,” Csanyi explains. “With the \$500 back, it was a no-brainer.”

As work on each property was done, the homeowner paid #1 Landscaping and the homeowner was reimbursed by the HOA. “People got a good deal,” Csanyi says.

There is no question #1 Landscaping got a good deal, too. It would be marginally profitable for a company to do the design work and site work required for just one home. The typical homeowner paid between \$1,200 and \$1,600 for the work done. However, multiplied by 15 or 18 jobs, the project became quite viable.

On the other hand, few HOAs would welcome a \$25,000 hit to their general fund for a landscape makeover when other projects always loom on the horizon. “It’s a lot of money, whether the HOA pays for it or increases dues,” Csanyi points out. The plan worked out by the Valley Creek Association and #1 Landscaping, he says, made it viable for everyone.

Homeowners were charged by the size of their yards — but almost every lot was different.

“We didn’t split hairs,” Csanyi says.

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#1 Landscaping picked four typical-sized properties, small to large, and did designs for each. The team then ported the designs to other, similar-sized units. The charge included all landscaping and materials. Removal of mature trees was a separate phase, and was paid by the HOA.

“It was a major change in curb appeal,” Csanyi says. “We got rid of the dense trees and went to a cleaner, open look.”

Evergreens were used instead of deciduous trees — largely to cut fall maintenance. Dwarf conifers replaced many of the superannuated blue spruce. “It worked out really well,” Csanyi says.

Overcoming challenges

Not every homeowner was delighted with the program. Several opted out, especially some who had invested their own money in landscaping in the couple of years leading up to the project. “I didn’t have it done. I didn’t think it was a good idea,” says one 30-year resident.

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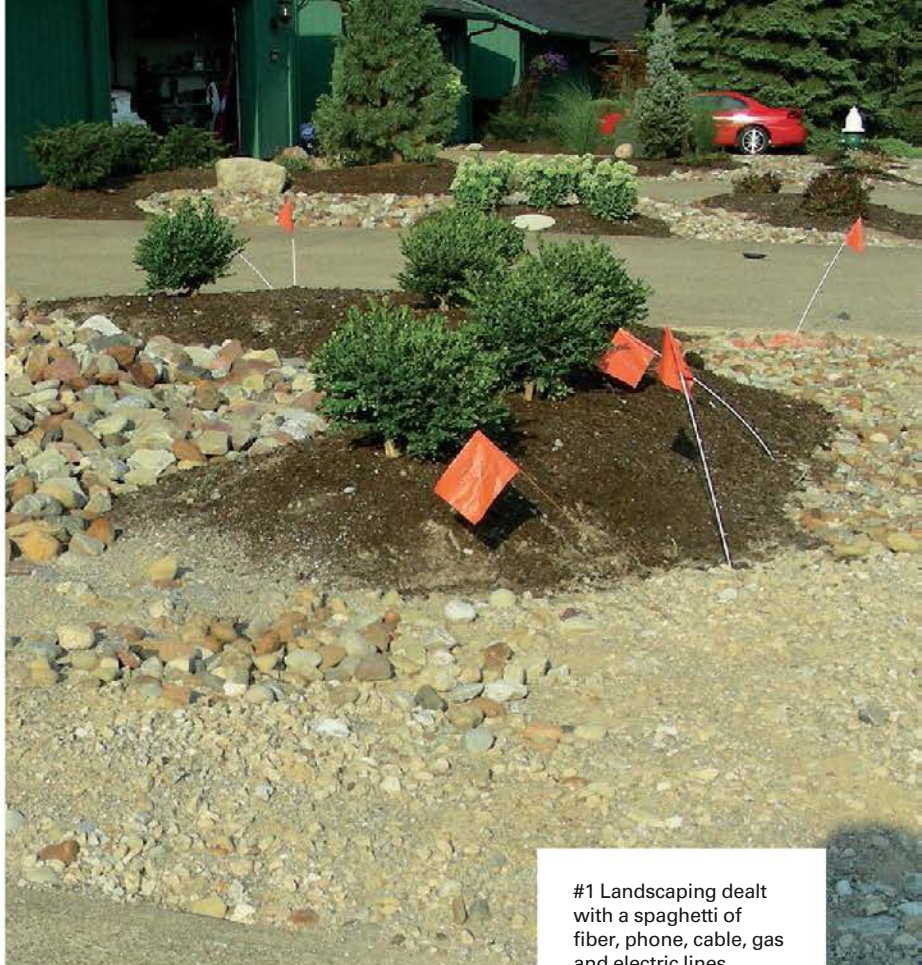
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She notes that she pays \$120 a month in condo fees and expects to get landscaping services as a part of that package.

Other residents had gone their own way with their landscaping. As a result, Csanyi says, the area became a mixture of styles — of red, black and brown mulch; of well-trimmed features and out-of-control plantings. Many residents had come to love the tall, old trees and did not want them taken out. Csanyi says some did not realize the trees were dying and were more burdens than beauties.

Other longtime residents, happy with the status quo, had lost touch with updates in the nursery business. “They remember their junipers and Taxus,” Csanyi says. “But cultivars have changed. People need to see new ideas.”

Valley Creek HOA first hired #1 Landscaping to do the design work. #1 Landscaping called in Jennifer Mil-



#1 Landscaping dealt with a spaghetti of fiber, phone, cable, gas and electric lines.

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brandt, the city arborist, to look at the site. She made her recommendations, which were incorporated into the plan.

Bostaph championed the project. “Ron took the bull by the horns and worked with us throughout,” Csanyi says. Bostaph even handpicked specific trees to be used.

The design preserved the xeriscaping, with river stone linking unit to unit — giving the feel of a dry riverbed carving through the properties.

The old, huge blue spruce were replaced with baby blue-eyed spruce, columnar blue spruce, snow fountain weeping cherry, Japanese maple and a number of understory plants like emerald and gold Euonymus.

Once the job got underway, it turned out that even the buried utilities were a tough situation to handle. “Utilities were a nightmare,” Csanyi says. “It was a spaghetti of fiber, phone, cable, gas and electric lines.”

A cooperative and helpful locator service contractor made the hassles easier. Still, says Csanyi, “it was a dicey situation every time we had to grind a stump, remove or plant a shrub.”

As the final phase of the project is done the Valley Creek area sports a new, low-maintenance look. And #1 Landscaping has a template it can suggest to other HOAs that want to preserve property values in tough economic times.

“We are not doing things the way we did in the past,” Bostaph concludes. **LM**

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