

THE PICTURE *of* HEALTH



AN 11-STORY HOSPITAL is rising in Escondido, CA, located in hot, arid and drought-prone San Diego County. Instead of traditional lush green lawns and plantings, the landscape will feature California native plants, decomposed granite pathways, stone and boulders found onsite and swales that allow storm water to infiltrate the ground instead of run off into storm drains.

“The industry and society are steering toward environmentally friendly landscaping,” says John Mohns, president and owner of Benchmark Landscape, which is installing the project. “Even though in the past, people loved their tropical oases and green lawns, things are changing — and landscape architects and property owners are responding to that.”

The landscaping includes installing bioswales for water runoff.

Behind the scenes at the environmentally friendly landscaping work for a new California hospital. BY JANET AIRD

Mohns founded the company in 1984, in Poway, near San Diego. Benchmark’s landscape installation clients are mostly general contractors, he says, but much of its client base is in the commercial maintenance department. He’s opened branch offices in San Marcos and Spring Valley, which are also in San Diego County — mainly for the maintenance division to be closer to the properties they work on.

Benchmark has approximately 260 employees, with

roughly 220 in the field.

“As a company, I think our managers have a passion for the environment, landscaping, plants and irrigation and drainage systems that function like they should,” Mohns says. “We’ve gotten very good at value engineering. We have some tremendous talent, and we have some good ideas.”

The hospital, Palomar Pomerado Health, is on a 4- to 5-acre site, says Benchmark’s general manager, Bill Hoffman. At a cost of approximately \$3 million, the landscaping project is

SUSTAINABLE LANDSCAPE

one of the largest Benchmark has been involved with, and is one of the largest in the country. It began in the spring of 2011, and has a completion date of mid-2012. San Diego-based Spurlock Poirier Landscape Architects designed the landscaping.

“They’re very involved onsite,” Hoffman says of the design team. “We’re working closely with the architect relating to plant procurement, plant layout, and site and design issues.”

One of the challenges is the sheer size of the site. Another is that the hospital is still under construction. With so many people on the job, there’s almost a little village of offices to administer and manage the various trades onsite, Mohns says. Benchmark has a project manager onsite full time, and has 12 to 20 employees in small sub-crews working in multiple areas. Scheduling and coordination among all the trades is probably the biggest challenge, he says.

“It’s amazing what it takes for everyone to do their jobs, and do their jobs efficiently,” he adds. “We have to work on a very tight schedule to make sure we can get into areas that are open for us. Other areas, we coordinate with other trades. There are some areas on the project — for example, the bioswales — where we have to work on Saturdays because that’s a day when no cars are parked there.”

The bioswales, at the edges of the parking lots, the perimeter of the site and other impervious surfaces, are the main storm water features in the project: Storm water will flow into them from the impervious surfaces.

As storm water infiltrates the ground, plant material, mulch and soil will filter out pollutants such as sediment and hydrocarbons. During large rain events, runoff may pond or flow in the swales, but it won’t work its way offsite. Instead, it will empty into surface drains at the lower part of the swales, Hoffman says, noting, “It’s amazing the effort that’s gone into treating the storm water.”

Bioswales collect and filter water before it enters storm drains.



Reduce, reuse, recycle

Another sustainable feature of the project is the reuse of materials already on the site. Benchmark will excavate the swales 3.5 ft. deep, and then replace some of the excavated soil with a mixture of soil from elsewhere on the site. They’ll use 3- to 8-in. aggregate from onsite for the mulch and bring in the remainder from elsewhere. They’ll landscape the swales with trees, drought-tolerant plants, and 2- to 4-ft. landscape boulders that were already on the site, as well.

“They’re absolutely gorgeous boulders,” Mohns says. “There’s a lot of beauty in things that in the past might have been thrown away.”

They’ll also use boulders from the site to build rock walls that designate main entrances and exits, driveways and other focal points. The boulders retain the soil on slopes, they’re natural — and they don’t need water, Mohns points out.

“In landscaping, a lot of thought can go into how you cover the ground, especially on a slope,” he says. “The landscape architect was very involved in laying these out. We’re working with them to ensure that their design is implemented.”

The landscaping includes other sustainable features as well, says Hoffman. The entire site is being capped with approximately 3 ft. of clean dirt that was excavated when the site was leveled. The decomposed granite pathways also

allow storm water to infiltrate into the ground. The benches are being made of Ipê wood from sustainable forests, and the landscape mulches in most of the planter areas are organic.

The main garden is the healing garden, which is designed to be an area of meditation and peace of mind. It will be surrounded by other gardens that also will be designed to be calming and restful — and drought-tolerant. San Diego is just emerging from a Level 2 drought that began in 2009, and designers are choosing plant palettes with water efficiency in mind.

“The challenge right now is finding enough of the right plants,” Hoffman says. “Typically, a good nursery is actively managing its stock, planting, moving its stock up as it matures, fertilizing and pruning. The recession depleted the available quality plant material stock. It definitely takes more time and effort to locate good plant material in the quantities we will need.”

Benchmark is buying blocks of plants and contracting with nurseries to grow them. If there aren’t enough, Spurlock Poirier will make substitutions or specify smaller plants.

“We have a very strong team out there,” Mohns says. “In the end, it will be a very successful job and a beautiful job.” **LMI**

The author is based in Altadena, CA.