

Swept away

Parking lot sweeping can boost commercial maintenance work.



Bell's Landscape Services has two parking lot sweepers in its fleet.

WHEN WIXOM, MICH.-BASED Bell's Landscape Services started handling the maintenance work for shopping centers that also needed regular parking lot sweeping, it decided to look into offering the service itself. A hefty investment later, the company is doing regular sweeping jobs and has found it to be a successful add-on service.

Adding a parking lot sweeping service to the company's maintenance package was a good fit, says Mike Bell, director of sales. "A lot of my maintenance clients utilize the service as part of the overall package we sell," he says. "But we do get a lot of clean-up work where that's all we'll do. We even do some work for other landscape contractors who don't have the equipment to offer sweeping. We also do a lot of work for construction sites where they'll have us do a thorough clean-up right before turning things over to the land owner."

The company invested in a TYMCO sweeper, which is essentially a huge vacuum that goes directly over the surface of the pavement. Buying the equipment was no small investment—it can run anywhere from \$65,000 to \$150,000. But if the service is marketed well and packaged appropriately into maintenance jobs, Bell says it would be possible to see sales of \$120,000 to \$150,000 per year out of one piece of equipment. Bell's Landscape operates two machines.

It's important to know the sweeping business has many low-price competitors since the downturn in the economy, Bell says. "There are guys jumping into this and really driving the price down," he says. "The rates used to be easily \$75 to \$100 an hour for this service, but some of the low ballers who are owner/operators of one machine and do all the work themselves charge \$40 an hour with no overhead. You can't compete with that. So you have to be smart and know when to walk away."

Fortunately, many of Bell's clients favor the one-stop-shop maintenance services

his company offers. And many clients like being affiliated with a large, reputable company as opposed to a one-man operation.

The sweeper machines pick up everything from leaves to trash and debris. Bell says the No. 1 item swept up is cigarette butts.

"We keep the corners and curb lines clean, in addition to the overall surface of the parking lot," adds Bell. "Most of the debris does accumulate on the perimeters of the lot, so we pay special attention there. We blow off walkways, completely vac the lot, and do a broom cleaning on the curb lines. Most of the lots also have public receptacles, so we change those out as well."

Figuring out when to sweep can be challenging. The

work needs to be done when the lots are clear, but because some townships have noise ordinances, the crew has to be mindful of timing. "We may have to get into the center at 9 p.m. and get the job done by 11 p.m. because of noise ordinances," Bell says. "From there we may go to a series of commercial sites and work all night long. We call it the 'hidden world' because most of our work takes place after hours."

Many of the jobs are set up on a regular schedule. "A busy shopping center may want the work done on a daily or every-other-day basis," says Bell. "But a commercial building may just want once-a-week or even once-a-month service. And then we get those special runs to clean up a construction site that might just be a one-time job."

Bell says the sweeping service is working out well for his company. "For us this is a sideline item—not our main source of income," he says. "But it's been a service that makes us better-rounded with our clients and has even gotten us some new jobs. It's definitely been a nice extra for us."

Casey Payton is a freelance writer with seven years of experience writing about the landscape industry.

SERVICE SNAPSHOT

WHY PARKING LOT SWEEPING?

"We had some clients inquire into it and decided it was worth the investment," says Mike Bell, director of sales for Bell's Landscape Services. "We understood that with a large investment like this, you may not get it back immediately, but it's over a period of time. But we're definitely finding it to be a successful service."

INVESTMENT? The equipment can run anywhere from \$65,000 to \$150,000, says Bell, and it isn't a long-lasting machine. When run at maximum capacity its lifespan is about eight years.

LEARNING CURVE? Bell's operators are trained by the sweeping machine manufacturer. "In about five to 10 days we can have an operator ready to function," he says.