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The Woods III  
IN WESTCHESTER

# The Components of Commercial Care

LC/DBM Staff Report

**A**s the U.S. economy continues its long climb out of the hole it nosedived into, companies and organizations will find themselves with more discretionary income, which is welcomed news for industries that provide service to commercial entities. Landscape companies are among the grateful.

According to Mike Dyck, the general manager of the equipment manufacturing company, Masco Sweepers, commercial service "is an area where the sky is the limit."

With that in mind, LC/DBM surveyed this particular landscape to help your business set up, or ramp up, commercial maintenance services.

There seems to be no definitive business model for landscape companies that perform commercial maintenance. Large or small, some count on this work for the majority of their income; others take it on only to maintain good relationships with their commercial installation clients.

**Above:** The Woods in Westchester, N.Y., is an HOA complex that Manzer's Landscape Design & Development maintains on an annual basis. Aside from the routine maintenance that includes mowing, weeding, trimming, clean ups, fertilization and snow removal. They also design and plant seasonal color like these Darwin hybrid tulips in orange goblet and Holland emotion varieties.

**Left:** Greenscape Inc. of Holly Springs, N.C., has a full service contract with the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, which includes weekly mowing of the two types of turf during the growing season (419 Bermuda and fescue), fertilization and weed control of turf areas, care and pruning of the shrubs and trees (like these small red oaks and the elms behind them), and maintaining the native grasses such as this area of lovegrass. The bare tree is actually an art installation made of stainless steel.





**Above:** After installing the waterfall, trees, plants, turf and more at Chicago Decking, a steel erection company in Merrillville, Ind., Smalls Landscaping continued to maintain the grounds. The scope of work in the spring included trimming trees and shrubs, applying fertilizer, herbicide and mulch to all beds, spraying for bagworms and planting seasonal color. Spraying for mosquitos continued throughout the summer.

**Right:** Specialty equipment like parking lot sweepers are often needed to offer a full line of services to commercial clients. This is Masco Sweepers' 1600 RBS model with a gutter broom and hand held blower. Also available is a magnet attachment for sweeping up nails and metal debris (inset).

Daniel Currin, the president of Greenscape Inc. in Holly Springs, N.C., says that about 60 percent of their revenue is from commercial maintenance, with the rest spread out over residential maintenance, installations and enhancements.

Canete Landscape of Passaic County, N.J., employees 200 people in the summer and 500 in the winter when they provide commercial snow removal and de-icing for apartment complexes, malls, office buildings, schools and municipalities.

On the other hand, Smalls Landscaping, a 25-person company in Valparaiso, Ind., does very little commercial maintenance but recently cared for the grounds at a corporate site where they installed new landscaping and a waterfall.

### Equipment

When gearing up for commercial maintenance, Ahmad Hassan, owner of Ahmed Hassan Landscape Services in Cameron Park, Calif., suggests that landscape contractors first take an inventory of their mowers. If they only own walk-behinds, they may need to purchase zero-turn or ride-on mowers.

"There aren't minimum requirements of equipment, but you have to be aware of what works for (a commercial) site," he said. "You may need to use 36-inch, 48-inch or 54-inch mowers or







**Top:** The TurfEx RS7200 spreader/sprayer is designed for both small and large applications as it is compact enough to fit through standard fence gates, yet efficient enough to apply liquid and granular materials on large properties. The ride-on unit offers variable spreading and spraying widths.



**Middle:** Canete Landscape's fleet includes a Komatsu WA500 wheel loader with a ScoopDogg snow pusher attachment. According to Tom Canete, snow maintenance contracts should not contain the words "snow removal" and "de-icing". "Snow plowing" and "salt or calcium chloride application" are more accurate descriptions.



**Bottom:** The TurfTeq 1304 Power Edger is a self-propelled, walking-forward edger and trencher designed for increased production and less operator fatigue. It has a 13 horsepower Honda engine and is capable of opening up to 150 feet of turf per minute.

larger ones. It really comes down to how much time you want to spend at the site."

Jim Day, the general manager of Turf Teq, recommends some type of commercial edger such as his company's 1304 model, a self-propelled, walking-forward edger, which not only increases production, it reduces operator fatigue.

"Consider investing in versatile equipment that can handle both small residential and large commercial clients," advises Barry Truan, vice president of marketing and development at TrynEx International.

He points out that specialty equipment like his company's SnowEx Drop Pro spreader is commonly used to service commercial accounts.

"Also, think about investing in new types of equipment that allow you to offer more services," Truan says. "For example, rotary brooms give contractors the ability to offer various cleanup services."

Bob Cramer, the director of operations at Pave Tech Inc., which manufactures the Paver Sweep Pro, a walk-behind rotary sweeper designed like a snow blower, agrees.

"You can clean pavements and backfill, clear snow and more," he says. "It's a small-scale equivalent to a hydraulic rotary sweeper attachment on your loader."

Among the equipment that Smalls Landscaping relies on for commercial maintenance are sod cutters, aerators, thatchers, dump trailers to carry mulch and debris, and a 100-gallon sprayer on a Kubota four-wheel utility vehicle.

Shifting gears somewhat, Jeremy Wishart, the senior programs manager for the Propane Education & Research Council, promotes the benefits, including reduced fuel costs, of converting equipment to propane.

"With small engine conversion kits covering a vast array of engines in the five to 40 horsepower range," he states, "it's safe to say that just about any gasoline engine in good working condition can be converted and the owner can start seeing immediate benefits."

And many manufacturers are producing equipment already set for propane. Wishart also points out that propane-fueled generators are available to power handheld electric equipment, and quickly and efficiently recharge handheld equipment batteries in the field.

### Scope of Work

Commercial maintenance responsibilities necessarily differ from region to region and from site to site as the following examples show.

To care for an HOA's common grounds, Manzer's Landscape Design & Development performs routine maintenance, defined as mowing, weeding, trimming, clean ups, fertilization and snow re-





**Above:** As an example of how a maintenance contract can lead to installation projects, The Woods also hired Manzers to replace old railroad tie retaining walls with Rosetta Stone walls. The blocks were chosen from the Belvedere collection. In front of the wall is climbing hydrangea. In the planter from left to right are a boxwood bush (3 total), knockout roses, Andromeda shrub (2), a dogwood tree, and nepeta plants.

moval. Extra maintenance services include designing and planting seasonal color, designing and installing drainage using rain gardens, and handling special plantings.

Among Greenscape's commercial accounts is the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh. It requires twice-weekly visits: one on Monday when the museum is closed, and a second visit before the weekend to make sure everything still looks good.

The full service contract involves weekly mowing during the growing season, fertilizing and weeding the turf areas, pruning and caring for the trees and shrubs, maintaining and weeding the native grass areas, cleaning up debris and trash, and maintaining the irrigation system and a rainwater cistern. There is also a large area of roses, which reportedly take a little extra attention. Seasonal jobs include leaf clean up in the fall, irrigation system start up in the spring, and yearly mulch replenishment for all the bed spaces.

The museum's grounds have a retention pond collection system that the landscape company keeps weed-free, and also clears various reflecting pools of any leaves and debris.

Smalls Landscaping reports that their commercial maintenance crews range from two to six, but add more on for large clean up jobs in the spring. For the grounds at Chicago Decking, the corporate campus that they were maintaining, the tasks were tied closely to the time of year.

Spring clean up consisted of cutting down all the perennials and grasses; trimming trees and shrubs where needed; removing any decomposed mulch; applying fertilizer, pre-emergence herbicide and a thin layer of mulch to all beds.

In addition, the landscape company would re-grade the gravel drive, start up the irrigation system, and reconnect the two pumps for the waterfall.

In late spring, Smalls would spray for bagworms, and plant the seasonal color such as wave petunias, begonias, and geraniums.

The summer responsibilities included hand weeding, deadheading the annuals and perennials, pruning and thinning the trees and shrubs, spraying for weeds and for mosquitoes.

Autumn would start with the removal of the annuals and then the planting of mums, cabbages and kales for fall color. Later, the irrigation system would be winterized.

During the holidays, Smalls installed Christmas lights and other seasonal décor. The final tasks of the year would be removing the holiday decorations, shutting off the waterfall pumps and disconnecting the water lines. After a month or so, the cycle would repeat.

### Contracts

When it comes to a signed agreement, there wasn't a solid consensus amongst our industry insiders but they did offer plenty of guidance.

Hassan said that unlike residential maintenance contracts that can be month-to-month, commercial contracts are usually renewable after one year. Manzer's contract with the HOA is an example of this.

Greenscape had to win a bidding process to secure the art museum account. The contract is a year-to-year agreement that has been renewed for three years.





**Top:** Smalls Landscaping, based in Valparaiso, Ind., changed color schemes on the grounds of Chicago Decking each year. Here we see purple coneflowers, white coneflowers, perennial geraniums, coral bells, Japanese irises, love grass, and gold thread cypress. All the annuals were fertilized with time-released Osmocote 14-14-14, and watered with Fertilome Blooming and Rooting soluble plant food. Roundup was used for weed control. The crew also had to hand weed, dead head the annuals and perennials, prune the evergreens and thin trees and shrubs.

**Above:** The grounds at the North Carolina Museum of Art were originally maintained by state crews but due to the complexity of the landscaping, the museum put the maintenance contract up for bid, which was won by Greenscape Inc. Their duties include keeping the reflecting pools clear of leaves and debris.

Smalls contract with Chicago Decking was an extension of the installation they did for them but it was a separate agreement.

Tom Canete writes his own contracts and reports that about every year they critique them, have attorneys review them and revise as needed. He says that his landscape maintenance contracts are four pages and his snow maintenance contracts are nine to 11 pages.

As for pricing, Hassan recommends that besides determining the number of hours it will take to perform a regular schedule of maintenance, such as mowing lawns, blowing leaves and trimming hedges at a given site, examine the site for any possible problem areas, and add in costs for unforeseen problems such as broken sprinkler heads and vandalism.

Smalls usually bills their maintenance on a time and materials basis. For the Chicago Decking account, they invoiced at the end of the year.

### Added Advice

So is commercial maintenance a good fit for your company?

"It comes down to economics and what you want to do with your business," says Hassan. "Are you big enough to do both residential and commercial maintenance? There could be a conflict if you want to move into commercial maintenance and aren't ready with your staff and equipment."

Truan of TrynEx International reminds landscapers that commercial customers prefer full-service vendors rather than working with multiple contractors.

As far as where to find commercial maintenance accounts, Hassan recommends property management companies as a good place to start.


Dyck of Masco Sweepers has a warning about what he sees as continual administration fluctuations in the property management industry:

"When there is a management change, you are at the highest risk of losing your service contract," he says. "New managers will evaluate all their expenditures. When this happens you must be prepared to present your best justification of your operation and costs."

Commercial clients' different expectations can include your crew's appearance.

"With commercial sites, there's going to be a lot more eyeballs watching what you're doing," says Hassan. "People are going to look at how you behave and how you dress. Your staff may need to wear uniforms to portray a more professional image."

Constant interaction with people is a challenge that Greenscape faces all the time on the grounds at the art museum. Even on Mondays, when the museum is closed, many individuals and groups use the grounds for exercise and other recreation.

Hassan sums up, "It's a different environment and there's going to be a learning curve." 

*Michelle Medaris and Larry Shield contributed to this article.*