



Contracting services: how to successfully develop productive partnerships

In recent years, most parks and recreation agencies have had to deal with the economic realities of reduced revenue and higher personnel costs. On the recreation side of the house, program fees and charges can be revised and/or programs can be eliminated/given to other service providers to close budget shortfalls. However on the parks side, which is charged with maintaining the amenities, facilities, and landscape, raising additional revenue can be problematic. As a result, many agencies are either considering or have started to contract for maintenance services.

Contracting for maintenance services, a concept that many times replaces department employees with con-

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tract employees, is usually looked at as being “bad” or something that will not provide the same level of service. However in our new economic reality, contracting may be something that we have no choice other than to accept. If that is the case, there are some lessons learned that can help to make contracting successful.

Contracts that are professional services contracts, where negotiation is possible, are more successful than “low bid” contracts. Experience shows that a low bid contract can end up costing more through change orders and other extra work than a contract that allows for ongoing negotiation. Price is important; however if it is the only criteria you are able to look at, you will probably end up spending more in the long run.

The quality of service provided by a contractor is paramount to any success. The contract needs to clearly state your quality standards so that you get what you want. Do not beat around the bush: if you want your turf to be “weed free”, then write your standards that way. Time is not something we are blessed with these days and spending additional time trying to haggle over agreement on a standard is time you do not have. Standards need to be written in as simply and directly as possible, so that a 12-year old child could say, “Yes it does or does not meet standards.”

QUALITY OUTCOMES IS THE GOAL

Standards for quality should be written as “outcomes” and not based on a performance that you have to count. You want to let the contractor know what you want: weed free turf. You don’t want to direct the contractor on how to make the turf weed free or you will be treating the contractor more like an employee and you will have to spend time making sure they do what you told them to do.

The relationship between the contractor and the agency needs to be written into the contract as that of a partnership where the contractor and agency have a shared interest in maintaining the landscape. One of the arguments against contracting is the belief that a contractor will not care as much as an agency employee. If the contract is an “us versus them” contract, that will be true. If the contract allows for incentives and collaborations, and extensions or options based on a partnership, the contractor will look at the contract as a longer term investment and will hopefully bring skills other than burying the agency in change orders. The City of Roseville uses both collaborations and extensions as methods of showing their long term commitment to their partners. In return this commitment provides their partner with a level of comfort that enables them to invest in both people and equipment that will make them more

productive and efficient. This commitment has led to the lowering of contract costs over time for the City of Roseville and has also resulted in a sense of ownership within the employees of their partners due to the numerous years that they have spent maintaining portions of Roseville parks and streetscapes. The City of Brentwood regularly meets with contractors to see if there are improvements that can be made in the contract. The intent is to get a great partnership that will last over time to the benefit of both partners.

Quality assurance is critical to the success of any contract and true partnership. The City of Roseville and the City of Brentwood both use the quality assurance process to assist in building relationships and partnerships between their staff members and the staff members of their private partners. Quality assurance inspections are necessary and can be very time consuming but are critical. If you do not do regular inspections, how do you know if your partner is meeting the standards you require? The quality assurance inspection should be a tool used to ensure that your partner is achieving their contractual obligations but can also be a valuable tool that builds the concept that “we” are maintaining this area for “our” residents and the inspection is just another tool that your partner can use in their scheduling, planning, and prioritizing. To simplify the process and reduce paperwork, inspections can be exception based, meaning that unless indicated otherwise, the site meets standard. This requires that the only information you need to identify relates to what does not meet standard. Additionally, the standards should have only two measurements: meets standard and does not meet standard. Measurements such as “needs to improve” only add additional time and misinterpretation between the contractor and the agency. Remember, friends are friends and business is business. When done properly your quality assurance inspections can meet your contractual compliance needs

while enhancing the sense of partnership for both entities.

A comprehensive background check of any prospective contractor is important so that you know what they can do in like environments. Is the company fiscally solid? Do they have references that you can check where they do work similar to what you are asking for? Do they use technology and can



they be flexible when necessary? Are they responsive to requests, especially in emergency situations? What is their quality control plan that will provide you a level of comfort that they are paying attention to the details you need? How do they resolve differences with they disagree on the terms of a contract? How did they do in the interview (yes, a formal interview should be a part of your process and you should request that they bring the staff to the interview that will be overseeing your contract). Having the comfort level that a company understands your expectations and can deliver the maintenance you expect is more than just a price consideration.

REMEMBER THE TRUE CUSTOMER

Customer service is many times a misunderstood component of maintenance contracts. Though it is important for the contractor and agency to provide excellent customer service to each other throughout the contract, the real customers of both the contractor and the agency are the citizens of the community. Many times we lose track that the citizens who pay the taxes and/or assessments, the very ones who actually use the facilities and landscape areas, are the customer. A contract should in take into consideration the wishes of the community related to standards and expectations as the agency is just the administrator of the contract when the citizens are providing the funding for the maintenance. Having users understand what they should expect from a maintenance standpoint helps the agency keep the contractor on track and builds on the partnership that should be one of the guiding principles of the contract. The quality of a contract is what the citizens and users want and expect. Truth be told, they care very little how you get there.

Finally, a contract needs to have corrective measures to insure that the work is done to the level the agency expects. Once a situation has been identified as not meeting





standard, how long do you allow the contractor to make repairs? If plant material dies on a contractor's watch, how do you get them to replace/pay for replacement? Do you assess a financial penalty for each out of compliance? What about repeat out of compliances; is there an additional penalty? There is not one way to do this; however you need to address corrective measures up front to make sure that the standards are met as per the contract conditions. The contract needs to be clear and up front on your expectation for corrective measures. You also need to understand that overseeing a contract takes time and is some-

thing that has to be factored into the cost of contracting for maintenance.

Contracting out maintenance services for many years has been considered something that most agencies try and avoid. In the new normal, where expenses continue to rise faster than revenues, it may be something that you have to consider. If you consider contracting, you can make sure you get what you expect if you spend the time writing the contract and standards using some of the lessons that have been learned to increase your chance of success.

Building partnerships takes time and effort on everyone's part and although the expectation should be written into a contract it is the responsibility of both parties to foster the development of a long term partnership. It is extremely important, especially in the beginning of a new partnership, to take the time to care for it. A partnership is no different than a marriage. Someone is going to leave the cap off of the toothpaste and someone else is going to leave the kitchen light on. The key to a successful partnership is learning to work together as well as appreciate each other's little quirks. Do not be over critical, especially in the beginning! It is important to talk through situations to ensure that people are "seeing" things in the same way and learning

from every experience, good and bad. Through years of trial and error both the City of Roseville and the City of Brentwood have come to anticipate that a true partnership will take 12-18 months to establish. The focus should be on making the initial period a long term relationship or you will forever spin in the trial and error period.

Generally speaking private contractors, and especially those bidding on public projects, have been trained by the public sector to come in low on the base bid and then make their profit on change orders, extra work, and cutting a few corners. This is their culture. The public sector culture is to be on guard for such activity and enter contacts with the intent of "catching" the contractor doing something wrong. Acknowledge that these cultures exist and understand it will take your partner's staff as well as your own staff time to adjust to this new method of thinking. Also, remember that you are the steward of public funds and must ensure that those funds are being used wisely. ■

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Managing trees, shrubs and other ornamentals at sports facilities

Ornamentals play a significant role in the overall success of a sports facility. To many spectators, the enjoyment of their game attendance is influenced as much or more by the aesthetics and function of the landscape at the facility as it is by the turf or outcome of the contest. This article will provide the sports turf manager with some of the tools and techniques to successfully manage the ornamentals at their facility.

ORNAMENTAL PLANT MAINTENANCE HIERARCHY

In the overall scheme of maintenance activities at a sports facility, a hierarchy exists. Depending on the size,

intensity of management and range of teams that are routinely using it as well as the number of practice, game and tournament quality fields that are present, varied levels of time are spent on different parts of a given complex for care of the turf. The same is true for trees, shrubs, groundcovers, perennials, annuals and containers. The important consideration is to recognize the hierarchy and devote time accordingly. For example, a high-interest tournament field might have adjacent shade trees, container plantings and shrub/perennial beds to care for routinely basis, while a practice field has little to nothing in the way of ornamentals associated with it. A thoughtful differentiation within the hierarchy is certainly a worthwhile endeavor.

▼ **WELL PLACED** shade trees at a sports facility. All photos by John C. Fech, UNL.



SIMPLE MAINTENANCE PLAN FOR THE SPORTS FACILITY

Once the hierarchy has been established, a simple maintenance plan is a natural second step. It can be set up field by field or by groups of plant material...either is fine as long as it gets accomplished. Just like a schedule for aeration, overseeding, irrigation, fertilization, mowing, disease/insect monitoring and other important aspects of field maintenance, a plan should be set up for ornamentals. Many sports turf managers have found it useful to establish a calendar format and conduct maintenance duties for both turf and ornamentals accordingly. Each month, a calendar is posted in the maintenance shed with an outline of the jobs and projects in the weeks and months to come. Written with grease pencil and a white board or a simple poster on a wall, these tools provide a helpful reference for all employees at the facility. Pruning shrubs, replacing mulch, planting bulbs, inspecting for disease and insects, removing weeds and monitoring the sprinkler systems are examples of items to be attended to in a simple maintenance plan.

SOILS AND FERTILITY

All plants in the sports turf landscape are not the same. On average, ornamentals require about a third to a fourth as much water and fertilizer as turf. As such, they should be cared for differently. Rooting depth tends to be



▲ **Left:** Inspection during site assessment is an important facet of maintenance. **Middle:** Mulch serves various purposes; it can reduce maintenance during mowing and serve to protect tree trunks from damage. **Right:** Providing shade and amenity is important, but ornamentals shouldn't encroach on the playing surface.

different as well. Approximately 85% of the roots of most trees, shrubs and flowers are located in the upper 24 inches of the soil profile. Naturally, the depth and density of the root system varies with the species and age of the ornamental. Newer plantings of woody plants usually produce “spiker” or “sinker” roots to provide initial stability as well as horizontally growing feeder roots, and then transition to a greater percentage of lateral roots as they mature. The locations of the roots in the profile have consequences in terms of the best placement of applied fertilizers and pest control agents as well as potential encroachment of roots into the sports field. When necessary, delivery via surface application or through drip irrigation systems is a good approach.

GOOD BED DESIGN

The critical factors with good bed design are separation of turf and ornamentals and the creation of a smooth and naturally flowing bed line.

As mentioned above, ornamentals have different needs in terms of water and nutrients. As such, the irrigation zones for ornamentals should be set for shorter runtimes and fewer days of the week. Regardless, the key principle of watering to the depth of the roots and keeping the roots moist but not dry or soggy is important for both turf and ornamentals.

The lines of separation between turfgrass and ornamental plants should be natural and flowing rather than abrupt and geometric. Gentle bed lines are much easier to maintain and more pleasing to the eye than ones that create rectangular or narrow beds. Within the bed, size and function of plant material are important considerations. Trees should be placed such that they provide shade for fans and overall amenity without interfering with sports play. Implementation of gradation and recognition of the mature size of specimens should be considered with the taller plants being placed towards the back of the bed and shorter material in the foreground.

SITE ASSESSMENT

For established ornamental plantings, a site assessment is a very helpful process. Actually, assessment is composed of two steps: an assessment, the initial documentation of the existing conditions and

status of the plantings; and analysis, a set of value judgments and possible recommendations for the future health and welfare of the plants involved. For example, a tree may appear yellowish and struggling (the assessment), and upon further investigation, it is determined that it has a nutrient deficiency and soil treatment or nutrient injections could provide it with a fighting chance to return to good health (the analysis).

A sample set of questions to use in site assessment/analysis is:

- Tree roots growing into the field?
- Plants too close to the field?
- Trees with defects near the field?
- Trees with nutrient deficiencies or pest infestations?
- Insufficient ornamental plantings?

Where could some easy to care for plantings be placed?

The positive benefits that proper mulching provides are many, while the negatives are few.

In some cases, after the questions are asked, assistance from another green industry specialist should be sought. In the case of the safety of a tree near a facility, an ISA (International Society of Arboriculture) certified arborist should be consulted to inspect the tree to determine if defects such as crossing limbs, decay, girdling roots, basal flare injury or co-dominant leaders are present. If so, action must be taken to remove or stabilize the tree in such a manner that it no longer poses a threat to people and property at the sports facility. Seeking the advice of a certified expert will not only increase the overall safety of the area, it will greatly diminish the liability of the property to potential lawsuits.

Perhaps one of the easiest but most advantageous maintenance practices for ornamentals at a sports facility is mulching. The positive benefits that proper mulching provides are many, while the negatives are few. The overall objective is to replicate what Mother Nature provides, namely a naturally occurring layer of twigs, leaves and fallen bark—at the ball park. Using organic mulch made from processed pieces of former woody plants provides weed suppression, cooler soils, moisture retention, nutrient recycling and a clean, neat

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appearance for the plant materials.

On the practical side, another benefit is that well placed mulch creates a barrier between bored or distracted teenage mower operators and the trees and shrubs that are near the sports field.

Otherwise referred to as "mower blight," damage to the trunk of a young tree greatly decreases the capacity for water and nutrient flow and creates openings in the bark and sapwood that facilitate decay and degradation of the woody tissues inside.

The two-part question always arises: "How deep should the mulch be and exactly where should it be placed? The two-part answer is: Starting 3 inches away from the trunk of woody plants and extending it as far into the sports facility landscape as is feasible is the best placement of mulch. A depth of 2-3 inches is desirable for most ornamental species.

Of course, mulch is not a panacea for all that ails an ornamental planting or a silver bullet for the sports turf manager looking to completely ignore its care. Mulch needs to be replaced over time



▲ **Left:** Gentle, easy to follow bed lines increase the ease of maintenance; a few well placed shrubs would complete the planting and cut down on fans cutting through the bed. **Right:** Mower blight causes disruption in water and nutrient flow.

and is an expense that must be included in the overall budget, but should be considered to be as important as a mower or irrigation system for the field turf.

Without a doubt, ornamental plantings that include groundcovers, perennials, annuals, containers, trees and shrubs can provide attractive surroundings as well as many desirable functional attributes for players, coaches and fans alike. Proper care must be taken to maintain them in a safe and responsible manner for the benefit of all. ■

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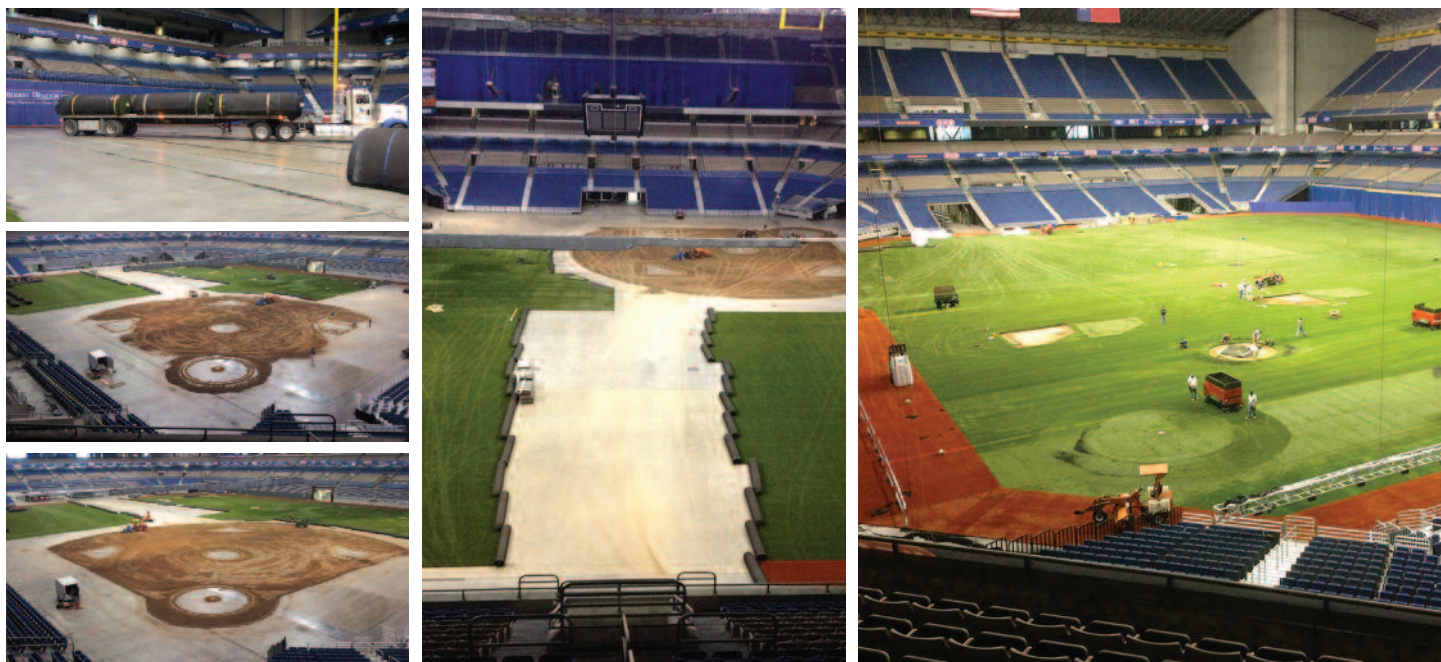


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Setting up for a “Big League” weekend in the Alamodome

Since its completion in 1993, the Alamodome in San Antonio has hosted many events. From NBA basketball to boxing, Final Fours to football, ice shows to trade shows, monster trucks to bull riding; its versatility has made it an easy choice for events both large and small. So when officials from Ryan-Sanders Baseball, a group founded in part by Hall of Fame pitcher Nolan Ryan, approached the Alamodome about hosting professional baseball, it was an opportunity to do something that never had been done inside the facility.

...decision was made to use **133,000 square feet** of custom turf from AstroTurf.



“We felt most comfortable with AstroTurf and their staff,” said Gottsch, “and with their being the official turf supplier for MLB we knew we would have their blessing.”

One of the first questions many wondered was why the Alamodome? “With our two teams in Central and South Texas (Round Rock Express and Corpus Christi Hooks), and the Ryan’s Ranch near San Antonio, they (the Ryan’s) had driven past the Alamodome many times and wondered about the possibility of baseball,” explained JJ Gottsch of Ryan-Sanders Baseball. “It was never the right time or the right opportunity never presented itself before, and then when Nolan became CEO of the Rangers, it became a possibility. The opportunity for the Rangers to extend their brand in San Antonio, and the chance to do something really special and unique, led us to the event.”

Playing a baseball game in a facility not specifically designed for baseball presented many challenges. Essentially everything had to start from scratch, from the playing field, to walls, bullpens and nets, batting cages and screens, none of which were available in the Alamodome. According to Gottsch, “We created a great team with Dome staff, MLB and Ryan-Sanders Baseball to get it done.”

The first hurdle was what to do for the playing field. Early ideas were to go with a grass field. However, when it became apparent that it would be labor intensive with

no guarantee on how long it would hold up or for how many games, officials looked at other options, including the possibility of purchasing the original turf field from the Sky Dome in Toronto. But in the end the decision was made to use 133,000 square feet of custom turf from AstroTurf.

"We felt most comfortable with AstroTurf and their staff," said Gottsch, "and with their being the official turf supplier for MLB we knew we would have their blessing."

The field installed was an AstroTurf GameDay Grass 3D52 Diamond synthetic turf system, a third generation artificial playing surface. Once the turf was selected, a decision needed to be made on whether the turf would be laid on a pad, dirt, or the concrete floor alone, and how the dirt areas would be handled. With the help of Murray Cook, former president of the Sports Turf Managers Association and a MLB consultant, the decision was made to put a 3-4 inch thick dirt sub-base under the infield area and feather it down to the floor in the foul areas and starting beyond the 95-foot arc to the outfield.

Doing a one-of-a-kind install like this would be difficult under normal circumstances, but making this one even more complicated was the Alamodome's busy schedule. In addition to getting ready for this event, the Dome already had other events on the schedule; two home games for the San Antonio Talons of the Arena Football League, a 2-day running event, and a pay per view Total Nonstop Action wrestling event. Coordination among all the parties was key; if this was going to succeed, we all had to be on the same page.

Kevin Swank with Texas-based AstroBuilders handled the install of the turf. When the turf was delivered, his team began the process of cutting it and piecing it together to conform to the Dome floor and seating configuration.

Once that was done, the turf in the north half of the building was rolled up and moved south and stored so stadium staff could install the arena for the Talons home game. This also required the turf on the south side to be partially rolled up so seating could be moved.

As soon as the AFL game was over, that field was removed and seating moved back, and the installation of the dirt sub base began. Garrett Reddehase, field superintendent for the Round Rock Express, and his staff handled this portion of the project. Once home plate was set, wood frames for home plate, the pitchers mound and each of the three base pits were constructed and placed. Then, approximately 300 cubic yards of dirt was brought in to provide the base that the turf would be laid on. Reddehase and staff then laser graded everything, and once it was completed, the turf was laid back in place and finally preparation of the turf began. Total installation of the turf took 8 days, which is about one-third of the time a standard project takes.

Upon completion of the turf, the crew from Round Rock began finally prep of the base pits, home plate and the pitchers mound. Bullpen mounds were constructed in the tunnels leading from the loading docks to the stadium floor. Crews began hanging wall pads on the seating and temporary fencing was placed in the corners and from behind home plate down the 3rd base line to form one of the dugouts. Once the games were complete, the turf was rolled up and hauled off to a storage facility down the street from the Dome, along with the wall pads, fencing and other items used for the event, to be used for future games.

More than 75,000 people attended the 2-day event that saw the Texas Rangers take on the San Diego Padres. Overall the response to the event was good from the both players and fans. Recently, a 2-year agreement was signed that will bring Big League Weekend back to the Alamodome. In 2014, the Texas Rangers will take on the Houston Astros for two games. As with anything, some changes will be made to enhance the experience for players and fans. The bullpens will be moved out onto the field so fans can see them. Lighting will be added in the corners to help brighten up these areas up (Alamodome lighting is configured for football not baseball). In addition, home plate will be moved a few feet to make the viewing experience better for all fans. Officials for both the Alamodome and Ryan-Sanders Baseball hope that this event will be something that they can grow and continue to do for many years to come. ■

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