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M A N A G E M E N T

COMMUNICATION ISSUE

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"It's a pleasure coming home..." Communication— It's a four-way street

BY MELANIE L. LANGE

Twenty acres of common area with extensive slopes. One hundred sixty-two homes requiring front yard maintenance. Two recreation areas.

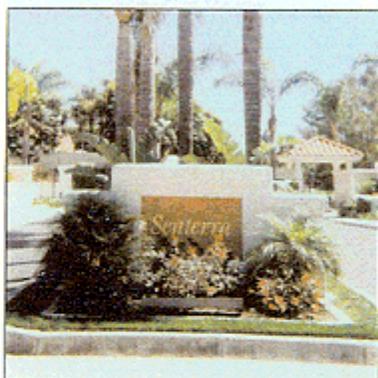
This is Senterra Homeowners Association in Rancho Santa Fe, CA. Landscaping is the single largest item in an association's budget. It's also the most visual aspect of the community and drives property values. Everybody wants their yard to look nice, especially when their monthly assessments include its maintenance. Unfortunately, this was not happening for Senterra.

For years, as the landscaping at Senterra aged, it had been going down hill. A new landscape committee took on the challenge of stopping the slide and of evaluating the problems. Three homeowners were selected—



Linda Hallock

Linda Hallock, chairperson, Delene Dunnun and Joanne Swank. Linda is also a board member with an intense interest in landscaping. "I wanted to be on the committee because I want our property to look good. I enjoy coming home to a pretty yard and neighborhood and that was not the case a year ago. We decided to investigate why the landscape was looking so poorly. It was first determined that we shouldn't just fire everybody and start new. We needed to find the problem. Were there enough personnel doing the job? Did we need to improve the irrigation system? Was the management company properly coordinating efforts with the landscapers? For six to eight months we analyzed the situation and determined the main problem was, in



fact, the landscape company. We tried to work with them but there was no progress," explains Linda.

As is the case with so many aspects of life, communication really makes the difference between success and failure. "Our previous landscapers were difficult to get a hold of. We would call them and two to three days later they would finally call us back. That got to be really irritating," lamented Linda.

Once it was decided that a new company was needed, the board did its homework. They consulted a landscape architect who recommended Steven Smith Landscape Inc. of Escondido, CA. They also took the time to look at other properties under Steven Smith Landscape's care and they liked what they saw.

"We work closely with the landscape committee, who in turn communicate effectively to the board," said Chris Cutler, landscape maintenance superintendent for Steven Smith Landscape. "Linda is very involved in what gets done. She makes recommendations and the board backs her up. This working relationship makes our job easier."

There were several areas in the landscape that needed attention. "There are slope areas throughout the community that were overgrown. Those areas had to be cleared out of dead plant materials and will eventually be replanted with proper ground cover and trees," explained Linda. "Some of the homes face a canyon. Fire safety became an issue because of overgrown and dead brush. We addressed that issue by adding a brush abatement program to the budget and Steven Smith Landscape is implementing it."

Another item needing attention is the irrigation system.

Irrigation loops connect three to five homes together and all lawns are watered, regardless of actual need. One may be in the shade while another is in the sun. This blanket approach is not working. "We are trying a pilot program on a couple of homes. To bypass the automatic watering cycle, we're using timers to gain better control and this allows each lawn to be watered according to its need. This approach should help us individualize the maintenance of the lawns. If it works as planned, we'll utilize the program throughout the community," said Chris.

"We've also had to address an infestation of green coalinga, which isn't even in the grass family. It's sedge that loves water. It was spread from lawn to lawn when they were mowed. Since some of the lawns were over-watered, sometimes seven days a week, this plant took over. We've had to do some re-setting with sod," continued Chris. "We've also set up a regular



Chris Cutler



Julie Menas

"This association has committees for all areas of management. The committee members are totally involved in the operation of the association and are dedicated to their positions. They make the director's job easy and are well prepared when they report to the board," Julie Menas, vice president, Menas Realty Company.

"The board of directors is composed of educated professionals who are business minded and all work together as a team. Meetings are well organized and run according to Robert's Rules of Order. It is a pleasure to attend their meetings," Andrew Menas, president of Menas Realty Company, San Diego, CA.



Andrew Menas

schedule for fertilizing and aerating. That has really made a huge difference."

"The crew from Steven Smith Landscape are very willing to work with us. They've learned the irrigation system, which is far from perfect. We were not happy with our primary entries. With the help of a landscape architect, Steven Smith Landscape implemented landscape enhancements, which have positively impacted our entries. Regular walk-throughs by the property manager, landscape committee, landscape superintendent and head gardener ensure that we are all working towards the same goal," said Linda.

"We dedicate one person to take care of the common areas. That's a full-time job in itself. This is a large property and having enough manpower is important in maintaining the look Senterra is striving for," added Chris. "Another company takes care of the tree trimming, which also makes our job easier. They keep the trees properly trimmed, which allows the plant materials to receive sun."

Senterra isn't only interested in maintenance but enhancement is a priority as well. There are several aspects of the landscape that are now receiving the individual attention they need. Irrigation, seasonal color, replacement materials, additional enhancements and tree trimming are all separate line items in their budget.

"This is really a team effort. The homeowners report problem areas to the management company who coordinate with the landscape committee and Steven Smith Landscape. When the gardeners are called, they respond immediately. Once the problem has been alleviated, the gardeners put a note on the homeowner's door letting them know their request has been taken care of. This kind of attention and interest has been amazing," explained Linda. "How many board meetings have you been to where the homeowners in



attendance actually applaud because they are so pleased with the work being done? The crew from Steven Smith Landscape handles problems everyday and it's that kind of positive reinforcement that makes their day. They genuinely want to please us. It's not just about the money."



Final advice

"It's important to use correct horticultural practices from the beginning of your project. If things are neglected, it's harder to bring them back. It can be a very long row to hoe. Have regular schedules for fertilizing and aerating. Water as conditions warrant, not convenience," said Chris.



"The board is revamping the whole property," said Jeff Gemmell, property manager from Menas Realty Company, San Diego, CA. "The

landscape has seen a huge improvement over the course of the year. It has a more modern look. It's nice to work with a board that cares so much about their property.

I've found that where the boards care, they have a better association. The board at Senterra is very motivated and works wholeheartedly for the good of the association. They are very professional and it's a pleasure to work with them. As far as advice, it helps to work closely with a landscape architect. That may be expensive but it's usually worth it. Keep in mind that getting your landscape to look the way you want it to isn't going to happen overnight. Be patient."

"Find a landscape company that takes pride in their work and wants to please your homeowners. Communication and teamwork are essential. I think it is important to have someone on-site, like a homeowner, with the interest and time to check the property on a regular basis and follow through so problems can be dealt with as they come up instead of waiting

for the next official walk-through. All involved should know what the common goal is and be willing to work towards it. If you're not willing to spend the money necessary to achieve your goal, you probably aren't going to be happy with the results. Our landscaping budget is now over \$3,000 more a month. However, we are very pleased with our beautiful landscape and it's a pleasure coming home," concluded Linda.



Jeff Gemmell