

# Striking a Balance in Community-wide Landscape Assessments

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As homeowners association management organizations (HOAs) strive to maintain a level of service for their communities, they are faced with the same budget constraints as the municipalities in which the HOAs exist. While the types of services may vary from one community to the next depending on the size of the HOA and the proximity to a major metropolitan area, the issues associated with maintaining a high level of service seem to be uniformly affected by the age of the community. Local jurisdictions have seen a shift in the way land is developed, both because land is a bit more scarce, and because we've learned the value in preserving trees and taking a "greener approach." With this tendency towards an overall greener approach to development, the planning departments in local jurisdictions incentivize quality open space and what could be considered the "natural experience." HOAs are therefore looking for ways to strike a balance between the "green" that they spend and the green that they get. Dewberry's Jeff Lange, Registered Landscape Architect and ASCA- and ISA-Certified Arborist developed a program he calls Landscape Analysis for Maintenance and Procurement (LAMP).

Through his years of experience in land development and landscape design, Lange found that most HOAs enact their maintenance programs year after year by rote. Particularly in older HOAs, the approach generally taken is one of "It seems to work, so why fix it?" Given the complexity of almost any develop-

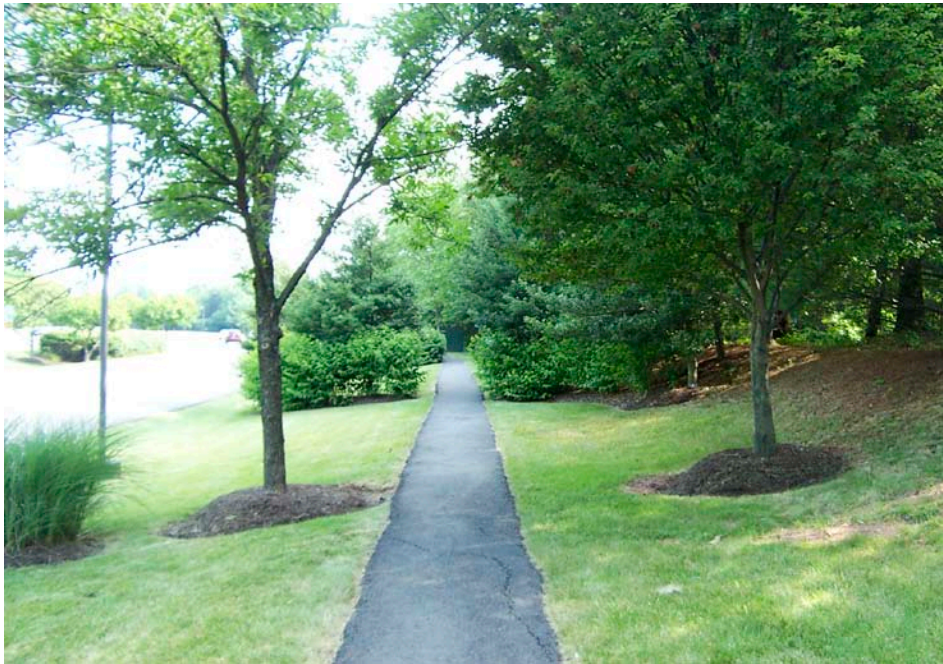


ment's footprint, which typically includes vehicular circulation, parking, utility easements, and other elements beyond the landscape, such a simplistic approach is less likely to be useful over the long-term. The economic times and the desire for more efficient green spaces drive the need for effective landscape management. The LAMP program looks at ways management organizations can positively affect the time and money needed to provide quality open spaces, while making those same open spaces more usable over time. By reviewing aspects such as landscape and hardscape inventories, master plans, concept designs, and the property's lake, pond, stream and wetlands, LAMP applies traditional and innovative methods to improve usability and often lower maintenance. The LAMP program also recognizes common areas of concern to

properties of varying sizes but does not follow a one-size-fits-all methodology.

## LAMP Case Study: Ashburn Village Homeowners Association

Ashburn Village is a large self-managed HOA in Loudoun County in Northern Virginia, and includes more than 5,000 homes, commercial areas, recreational facilities, schools and other amenities on more than 1,500 acres. Dewberry completed the master plan portion of a LAMP program for Ashburn Village's Community Association in 2008, and is currently developing concept plans based on that master plan. There are more than 500 acres of common area and seven large lakes. Prior to the master plan, Dewberry completed critical inventories of the common area landscaping,



natural areas, pedestrian pathways, and the lakes. The analyses and results are explained below.

### Landscape Inventory and Analysis

This task was performed by a certified arborist and licensed landscape architect. Inventories in established HOAs are typically done with a focus on developed common areas, and include a listing of woody and perennial landscape materials with information on location, condition, and suggested cultural practices, as well as a general reporting on the condition of turf areas. Where native trees and naturalized areas exist, these are minimally accounted-for, and the interface between them and the more extensively managed landscape areas is considered. For Ashburn Village, tens of thousands of individual plants were surveyed, and key high visibility areas were given special attention.

As a result of the landscape inventory, the management of Ashburn Village was able to see where their landscape had been going over the past 20 years, see what worked and what continues to work, and effectively plan for the next 20 years.

The plant material was categorized by habit—tree, shrub, perennial, other; by type—evergreen or deciduous; and by use—street, open space, lake edge. Turf areas were considered separately for management purposes.

A number of common issues became apparent. There are quite a few Ash trees scattered in the common areas throughout Ashburn Village. As might be expected, they have disease and pest issues, including borers, sawfly and cankers. Of the many Hemlocks that had been planted along the Village's boulevards, only a few remained. Those that haven't failed from being planted in the sun and along a four lane divided road have woolly adelgid and scale. Most of the Austrian Pines look terrible thanks to Diploдия and many of the White Pines have blister rust.

There were also a good many things that seemed to be working well. The woods-edge plantings near pedestrian paths were generally found to be in fair to good condition, and where they haven't been hedged into un-natural-looking box shapes, the common area shrub masses seem healthy.

### Hardscape Inventory and Analysis

This inventory included more than 30 miles of trails and sidewalks, dozens of pedestrian bridges, playgrounds and other site amenities. Paths were analyzed for ADA and AASHTO compliance, and factors such as sight distance, landscape conflicts and slope issues were considered.

Beyond their age and the associated deterioration, the pedestrian ways had some common and not-unexpected issues. Trip hazards were frequent thanks to tree roots from nearby landscape trees growing into and cracking the asphalt walkways. Some of the paths were far too narrow to be useful and safe. Outside the various concerns, the network of pathways and sidewalks seemed to provide fairly good connections between the various neighborhoods and from the neighborhoods to the schools and shopping. The paths along the shores of the lakes in Ashburn Village are among the most frequently used paths in the County.

### Lake Survey and Analysis

This task included a survey of over six miles of shore line for almost 33 acres of open fresh water on seven lakes of varying size. Dewberry analyzed the stability and serviceability of the water / land interface, and looked at amenities inherently tied to the lakes, such as piers, docks, and boat launches. The major flora was identified and categorized. All but one of the lakes were the result of the construction of earth dams on existing drainage ways—and in one case, on a large perennial stream. Dewberry recognized that this method for facilitating storm water was outdated by today's standards, but knew that was not the only concern relative to the lakes. They had to consider the continued functionality of each lake as a storm water management facility while looking at the upstream and downstream effects of any manipulation of the water impoundments. They also had to con-

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sider the aesthetic and recreational function of each lake. The residents in Ashburn Village made it clear at preliminary meetings with Dewberry that they love the lakes.

One of Dewberry's most challenging tasks was educating the various factions of bird watchers, cat-tail advocates and fishing enthusiasts as to the shared function of the lakes. It was emphasized that the lakes were man-made, and as such, they should be managed differently than a naturally-occurring lake. Their suburban location and function as storm water management makes the lakes susceptible to a variety of issues.

### Landscape Master Plan

The various inventories were put into report form and then used as a basis for developing a master plan. The Master Plan Report attempted to address the areas of concern noted in the inventories, and placed emphasis on the specific areas noted in the original RFP for the project. Every open space feature was considered, including the community's entrance features, athletic fields, pedestrian circulation system, lakes, and other common area elements and amenities. The report gave general direction for coordinating

all the various common area elements, along with generalized construction notes and details to provide on-site and contracted maintenance personnel with a better understanding of the overall picture. During the writing and development of the Master Plan Report, Dewberry met several times with landscape committees and community association board members in workshop-like settings to gather information in order to include as many universal elements as possible.

### Conceptual Designs

The Community was divided into 16 different planning areas, and for each one, a concept plan was prepared. Each concept plan was servant to the master plan, and each grew naturally out of the combination of the various inventories and analyses. Concept designs typically include specific details and notes for contracting purposes, and are followed up with a project review by the attending landscape architect and County Planning Office personnel. Dewberry also prepared presentation graphics showing "before and after" pictures of the areas of concern in order to paint a clearer picture for the residents. Prior to their enacting any of the concept plan enhancements, Dewberry held open meetings and presented

the plan to the residents who would most likely be affected by the plan.

With access to many of the disciplines associated with land development, Dewberry has also been able to provide many other engineering and site planning services as the concept plans have come to life in Ashburn Village, each time relying on the master plan to drive how things got done. To date, Dewberry has done instrument surveys, permitting or mitigation with wetlands or Waters of the U.S., wetlands function and analysis, and even complete construction documents.

As an example, the original hardscape survey led to an visual inspection of several pedestrian bridges and, eventually, to the realization that one such bridge was in serious disrepair. Dewberry's structural engineers were able to analyze the situation and design a new structure. Their landscape architects developed the site plan so that much of the landscape in the immediate area was maintained or relocated, and then the new bridge worked seamlessly into the surrounding landscape. Communication and construction coordination were critical, so that even with all the activity associated with bridge replacement, crews were able to stay away from potential conflicts with a nearby floodplain.

The end result for Ashburn Village is that they have a plan that will take them through the next 20 years and, given the flexibility built into the master plan, well beyond. Their landscape will continue to flourish, and will now be more efficient to maintain while providing a natural experience for the residents. 🌿