Educating Homeowner Associations on Hiring Landscape Contractors

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The Environmental Horticulture program of the Manatee County Extension Service has partnered with Manatee County Neighborhood Services and local landscape professionals to offer educational programs to homeowner association board members as well as property managers, architectural review boards, landscape committees, and other community members.

Homeowner association board members are tasked with evaluating and accepting landscape maintenance contracts for their communities. Often, the board member lack specific knowledge regarding landscape maintenance practices, therefore, use cost as the only evaluated criteria and award the lowest bidder the contract. Homeowner associations soon find that the level of service is not what was expected, however, since they neglected to look at the qualifications and experience of the contractor and are now forced to accept lower quality maintenance until the contract expires. The same cycle happens over and over as they continue to evaluate on cost alone.

The Environmental Horticulture program of the Manatee County Extension Service and the Manatee County Neighborhood Services, in association with local landscape professionals, has developed an educational program for homeowner association board members and other community members.

The program, Tips for Hiring a Landscape Contractor, incorporates PowerPoint presentations as well as panel discussions with landscape professionals, followed by question and answer sessions. The purpose of the program is to provide community decision makers with guidelines on best management practices in the landscape, the purpose of the best management practices, and items to consider for inclusion in their landscape contracts.

Program Objectives

Through an advisory board overseeing the Environmental Horticulture program and a stormwater advisory board in a local community the need was determined for education of HOAs regarding what to look for in a landscape contractor. The HOA board members oversee the bid process for landscape contracts. Board members rotate frequently (sometimes annually). Often, the only criteria used to evaluate is cost, as the board members are typically laymen and can relate to the cost component.

Landscape contractors who are trained and certified have higher costs of doing business due to training and continuing education; therefore, need to charge more for their services. However, the HOA boards do not often give value to training and certification and continue to evaluate the bid for service on cost. The Tips for Hiring a Landscape Professional program provides information on other criteria to consider when hiring a landscape professional—including insurance, professional associations, best management practices, certifications, licenses and experience. The intended audience is HOA and condominium association board members, architectural review committee members, and property and community managers.

Impacts and Discussion

There was an overwhelming audience response that this was what was needed to help HOA board members have conversations with landscape contractors. At least 95% reported that they gained knowledge as a result of this program. Ninety-two percent stated that they would share information received at the workshop. Since the workshop, 30% of attendees have contacted us to host the program in their HOA or asked to receive the materials for presentation to the HOA board.

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