

LANDSCAPING FOCUS GROUP REPORT

SEPTEMBER 2018

BACKGROUND

In May 2016, The Capital Region Housing Corporation (CRHC) released the first Tenant Satisfaction Survey, resulting in responses from 487 households or 37% of tenants. Overall, 90% of tenants reported overall satisfaction with CRHC services. However, it was noted that while the majority of tenants were satisfied with CRHC's level of landscaping services, there was some room for improvement. With the work of a Tenant Engagement Board Task Force on behalf of the CRHC Board of Directors, renewed interest and resources were allocated to CRHC landscaping.

In August 2017, the CRHC conducted a corporation-wide landscape survey to assess the primary needs and concerns of tenants regarding the current state of landscaping work being done in their communities. A total of 89 respondents highlighted five primary concerns:

1. Landscapers need more time;
2. Landscapers are doing a good job;
3. More pruning of hedges and bushes required;
4. Improve the garden beds with soil and mulch;
5. The large and dead trees need to be cut back and removed.

Using tenant feedback and staff recommendations from site inspections, a decision was made to create two landscape tenders along staffing portfolio lines – West and Peninsula. Each property is divided into one of these portfolios ensuring that staff would work with one landscaping Contractor with an effort to improve communication and build relationship. Canadian Landscape Standards were adopted when writing the specification in an effort to define and elevate the service standards.

Additionally, pricing for two different levels of service was requested (moderate & groomed) to ensure that the Board of Directors had choices when considering offers in relation to annual budgets.

Island Earth was the preferred contractor for both portfolios and the 'groomed' level of service level was approved.

The Groomed Maintenance Standard:

*"A standard of upkeep that is neat, orderly, groomed appearance but not to a 'near perfect' standard. This is achieved by frequent, regular routine maintenance of a fairly high intensity, with regular monitoring and adjustment to keep high visual quality."*¹

This level of service was determined to be most appropriate in light of the overall feedback received. Moreover, it included the additional services:

- soil testing and fertilizer program,
- the application of organic 'composted bark' mulch to beds,
- cultivation of garden beds,
- standards for weed removal from lawns and garden beds,
- aeration of lawns, and
- more frequent pruning and the flexibility to add other services, if identified.

The agreement stipulated that the newly selected landscaping firm meet with tenants and CRHC staff to convey its objectives, and receive feedback and related information from tenants. As such, the CRHC and Island Earth met with tenants on March 21st 2018 at 1 Centennial Square, Victoria, British Columbia.

¹ Canadian Society of Landscape Architects and Canadian Nursery Landscape Association, *The Canadian Landscape Standard, 1st edition*, (Canada: 2016), 156.

MEETING OVERVIEW

Through the Landscaping Survey, 40 tenants indicated they would be interested in participating in a focus group to share their ideas about how to improve landscaping services at the CRHC.

The meeting was set for March 21st, 2018 from 10:00 AM – 11:30 AM at 1 Centennial Square, Victoria, BC. A total of fourteen tenants attended the meeting, representing ten different CRHC communities. Both family and adult communities were represented. Two representatives from Island Earth and five CRHC staff attended as well. Many other tenants sent their regrets and indicated they would like to receive any following communications, including this report.

Below is a summary of the major themes that surfaced over the course of discussions, and that were subsequently recorded on paper by the tenants.

QUESTION 1:

WHAT WAS GOOD ABOUT LANDSCAPING IN THE PAST AND WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO MAINTAIN; AND WHAT WAS CHALLENGING ABOUT LANDSCAPING IN THE PAST AND YOU'D LIKE TO SEE CHANGED?

Tenants agreed that:

1. The frequency of the service was largely satisfactory;
2. Past workers were largely respectful to the trees.

Tenants also identified the following challenges:

1. Leaf-blowing foliage onto their patios;
2. Sprinklers were set to go off too early;
3. Noisiness of equipment during the day;
4. Some dissatisfaction as to the quality of work previously done.

QUESTION 2: WHAT IMPROVEMENTS WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN THE LANDSCAPING?

Discussion from tenants highlighted the following suggested improvements:

1. The need to replenish the soil in garden beds;
2. Reducing the size of overgrown hedges and keeping them trimmed uniformly;
3. Removal of invasive species, dead plants and trees;
4. More drought resistant plants and better overall upkeep in areas with low sunlight;
5. More aerating, mulching and bald patch remediation;
6. Improved communication between the caretakers and landscapers in order to solve issues more effectively.

The regular pruning of trees was also mentioned. However, it is important to note that CRHC maintains a separate arborist contract for all maintenance of trees and does not fall under the landscaping contract with Island Earth.

QUESTION 3: HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE INVOLVED IN THE FUTURE?

Continuation of the current consultation process is something that the tenants would very much like to see. There were numerous comments praising the initiative shown by the CRHC in setting up this meeting, with participants hopeful that dialogue will continue to be maintained on the progress of the new landscaping company's work, and associated issues.

CRHC recognizes that the tenants who participated in the meeting are passionate about their communities and the on-site landscaping. While many tenants offered to assist with particular landscaping duties, CRHC requests that these activities be left to the hired contractors, Island Earth. If tenants have concerns regarding the landscaping services, these should be directed to the on-site Caretaker and not directly to the landscapers as CRHC is responsible for managing the landscaping contract.

Some tenants also expressed interest in being more personally involved, particularly in communal gardening activities and interactive methods of procuring food (i.e., grow a row, seed library workshops, etc.). CRHC is currently exploring options to continue this conversation.

MEETING OUTCOME

The CRHC Landscape Focus Group allowed CRHC to better understand what improvements tenants would like to see in relation to landscaping.

Tenant feedback from the Landscaping Focus Group on March 21st, 2018 confirmed that there was room for improvement with CRHC's landscaping services. The CRHC Landscape Focus Group allowed CRHC to better understand what improvements tenants would like to see in relation to landscaping.

Tenants' feedback from the Landscape Focus Group support CRHC's new contract arrangement which is designed to:

- 1) Improve the level of landscaping services to a "Groomed Service: Level (i.e., a standard of upkeep that is neat, orderly, groomed appearance but not to a 'near perfect' standard. This is achieved by frequent, regular routine maintenance of a fairly high intensity, with regular monitoring and adjustment to keep high visual quality.);
- 2) Improve communication between CRHC staff and landscaping contractors on all sites by having designated contractors.

Through feedback from all meeting participants, it was determined that the meeting improved communication and understanding amongst all stakeholders—tenants, contractors, and CRHC. Tenant feedback overwhelmingly found the meeting useful and encouraged CRHC to continue to host more. One tenant present commented: *"I'm really encouraged by what happened here today. This is great. Keep it going!"* As such, CRHC commits to holding an annual landscaping meeting.

If you would like to be involved in future communication and/or events regarding landscaping, please contact the office at crdhousing@crd.bc.ca or 250-388-6422.