Creating the Perfect Landscape Maintenance RFP
A Property Manager’s Guide to the RFP Process

An e-book by Austin Outdoor
a Yellowstone landscape company
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Introduction

After all of these years, you’d think it would have been figured out by now. You create a Request for Proposal (RFP), send it to a few landscape companies, they send you a proposal, then you pick the company that is qualified and has a good price. It seems so simple!

The RFP process has become quite a bit more complicated over the years, especially in service based markets like the landscape maintenance industry. The purpose of the RFP, to get the best and most competitive landscape maintenance company on your property, is often lost in today’s just-going-through-the-motions methods. Now, unaccredited “point systems”, unrealistic terms and conditions, and vague definitions have turned strong, credible landscape companies away from blind bidding on properties.

"When you were sitting in that capsule listening to the count-down, how did you feel?"

Well, the answer to that one is easy. I felt exactly how you would feel if you were getting ready to launch and knew you were sitting on top of two million parts -- all built by the lowest bidder on a government contract.

- John Glenn, American Astronaut

This guide is intended to help property managers, owners, developers and board members truly get value through the RFP process. Of course, if you know the landscape company you want on your property and you’re just putting together an RFP to go through the motions, this guide is not for you. This guide is for you if you’re seeking to select the best landscape maintenance company to take care of your property, communicate effectively, and have your best interests in mind –all at the best price possible.
Where to Begin

As Plato once put it, “The beginning is the most important part of the work.” A great RFP takes a well thought-out plan right from the beginning.

Updating some dates and property names from your old template isn’t enough. It’s time to sit down and think about what’s truly going to help you select the best possible landscape maintenance company for your property. This section will help you identify exactly what you should be thinking about, before you start creating the actual RFP.
Your primary goal in the RFP process should be to obtain the best, most qualified and most competitively priced landscape maintenance company for your property.

It sounds easy, but in a market where there are as many landscape companies as pizza shops, things can get cloudy.

Usually, the more complex your landscape needs are, the fewer landscape maintenance companies are capable of handling your needs, but everyone including *Chuck and a Truck* will submit a bid. Of course, if you’re targeted in your approach, your proposers will be 100% qualified.
As you begin thinking about your RFP, consider for a moment the perspective of the landscape company. Large, credible companies won’t be bidding on your RFP if you’re handing it out to every landscape company and their brother. In fact, a huge red flag for many organizations is when too many competitors are involved; this forces quality companies to “punt” the opportunity. The art of creating your RFP will be to attract the right companies, not to see how many companies you can get a number from.

Landscape companies know their competition. Large firms know their fellow large firms, and the local landscape companies usually know each other well. A great strategy is to define the type of landscape company you want on your property, and attract only the companies that fit your mold. If you compromise your target company list, you’ll lose credibility, and possibly also lose very strong companies from bidding on your property.
Where to Begin
You’re Getting Qualified Too

As soon as a landscape management company is notified of an RFP, they enter into a qualification process. Yes, the point of your RFP is for you to qualify landscape companies, but valuable landscape companies will in fact qualify you. Here’s what they’re thinking:

- How many competitors will be involved in this process?
- Does the client have a good relationship with their current landscape provider? How long has the current provider been on site?
- How does the property look? Is there any opportunity to be the ‘solution’ for existing issues with quality?
- Does the client only care about price, or does the client value communication, pro-activity, quality, etc.?
- Will the client meet with us throughout the process? Is the client answering questions and providing site tours?

“Your [proposers] chance of success is around 3-4%”
- Harpooning Whales with an RFP

Remember, for large, complex properties, landscape companies put days, sometimes weeks worth of effort into putting a proposal together. If the forecasted win rate is proving the effort an unworthy task, you will lose highly qualified, highly valuable landscape companies from bidding on your property.
How to Create an RFP

If you’re going to update or re-tool that old RFP template that’s been producing more addendums than respondents, this section is for you. The goal in creating the RFP is to make sure all responders are on the same playing field. There’s nothing more frustrating than five bidders bringing back numbers that are all over the board.

You want Apples to Apples, not Apples to Oranges... right?

We know, we know; creating the RFP may not be the most exciting part of your job, but in the long run, a well constructed RFP is going to make your life a whole lot easier!
How to Create an RFP

Outline and Organize

RFP’s are created to answer two primary questions:

*Is the contractor qualified and credible?*

*Is the contractor’s price competitive?*

Your outline should be focused on getting an accurate answer to these questions. Breaking the process down into these components will:

I. RFP Objectives and Submission Requirements

II. Instructions to Proposers

III. Technical Specifications and Scope of Work

IV. Qualifications of Proposer

V. Proposal Pricing; Maps, Pricing Sheets/Bid Forms, Unit Pricing Forms, etc.

In each section, ask yourself if the information being requested is answering one of the two main underlying questions. If it’s not (not including legal, policy, or directive information), consider removing it from the RFP. Fluff in an RFP is like fluff in a proposal; it wastes valuable time and clouds the important points.

“Many RFP’s are flawed documents, written by people who are too busy to be writing them”
- Tom Searey, Land Big Sales with an RFP
How to Create an RFP

Introduction—Objectives and Requirements

Always start off with an “RFP Objective.” Let your bidders know what’s most important to you. If you’re sincere about finding the best landscape company for your property, tell them. If you just want a cheap price, don’t tout your point system for evaluating bids.

After your introduction (RFP Objective), directly introduce the time frames, contact information, submission requirements and other relevant dates. This is also a good section to introduce the property that’s the focus of the RFP. Describe its history and discuss some of the strengths and challenges of maintaining the landscape.

72% of Fortune 1000 companies have already selected the vendor when they send out an RFP* 

*Don’t Follow the Rules—Cheat!, The Whale Hunters, LLC
How to Create an RFP

Instructions to Proposers

The “Instructions to Proposers” section contains a lot of legal and policy-related information that each recipient has to understand to bid on the project. Use this section to qualify your RFP respondents. Often, tools such as bid bonds (or proposal guarantees) can weed out (pun intended) landscape firms that do not have the financial capability or résumé to handle the work. Other sub-points in this section might be:

- Submission Rules
- Familiarity with Laws
- Interpretations and Addenda
- Right to Reject or Award
- On-Site Visit Details
- Pre-Proposal Conference Details
- Protest Rules
- Evaluation Criteria

Evaluation Criteria are a critical piece to receive proposals that are aligned with what you’re looking for in a landscape maintenance company. In many cases, evaluation points are divvied up into Experience, Personnel, Price, and Understanding of Scope; with price typically having the largest points allotted. Create evaluation criteria that don’t just look good to a board, but that identify exactly what your property’s priorities are. By having evaluation criteria that do not fit your needs, you’re sending proposers on a wild goose chase, which could result in inconsistent responses or fewer bidders on your next project.
How to Create an RFP

Technical Specifications and Scope of Work

Is it Apples-to-Apples? You’ve been there; you’re in a meeting reviewing several different bids; they range from $120,000 to $250,000 and you wonder how that can possibly be. Chances are, it’s not the result of the many well-thought out pricing strategies of landscape companies. This is probably the result of a poorly administered RFP that lacks detailed, specific or accountable scope of work. It probably didn't have a clear and simple bid form either.

In service industries like the landscape maintenance industry, specifics are everything. There are maps and specifications that help identify the tangible, but let’s say you request 38 mowings on a property. This isn’t exactly how it has to be. One landscaper may predict an early winter and budget for 36 cuts, despite what’s being presented. It’s also entirely possible that contractors are including (or excluding) different areas. On a sizable property, that could be thousands of dollars difference. These types of “strategies” from landscape maintenance companies affect how you need to put a landscape maintenance RFP together.

Your Scope of Work needs to be as specific as possible. Use maps with highlighted areas of exactly what will be maintained and include service calendar templates, guaranteeing to the landscape firm that accountability will be given to each proposal’s specifications. A specific scope of work that leaves no room for alterations or interpretations is one of the biggest keys to your RFP’s, and ultimately your success. If you take short-cuts here, your winning bidder will be taking short cuts on your property.

RFP’s were originally created for product solicitations, not service solicitations.
How to Create an RFP

Qualifications of Proposer

At this point, you’ve hopefully already qualified your proposers when you sent the RFP to the landscape maintenance companies you’ve heard (or experienced) are good. Make this section valuable! Think of this section as the opportunity for you to ask “Who wants it the most, and who is the best fit?” This is your opportunity to put in plain view your priorities for the property. If you’re looking for environmental leadership, ask for a list of LEED projects or examples of past stewardship initiatives. If you’re looking for pro-activity, ask for references that speak to the contractor as being pro-active.

Don’t ask for information that just isn’t needed. Time and time again, poorly written RFP’s request information that adds no value in the RFP process. These types of requests add more work for the people assembling them, and confuse the intent of the RFP. Be targeted in your requests, and you’ll get the responses you are looking for.

Fluff Requests

✔ **Detailed Project Listing/Status of Contracts on Hand**
  This alludes to a request for installation and construction projects. What you’re looking for is a property listing of existing maintenance clients for whom you perform similar work.

✔ **General Contractor’s License**
  This is not applicable to landscape management services.

✔ **Company Owned Major Equipment**
  It’s great to ask about what equipment would be used on your property, but asking for the company’s overall equipment list? In some cases, you’re asking for a ten page document from a national company that doesn’t help qualify local capabilities.

✔ **Agreement to an Attached Contract**
  Prepare for qualified landscape companies to reject your RFP if you’re asking them to agree to a rigid contract in the proposal process. This is a HUGE red flag for landscape companies.
How to Create an RFP

Proposal Pricing; Maps, Pricing Sheets, Unit Pricing Forms, etc.

The Proposal Pricing section may seem pretty straightforward to construct, but don’t let it fool you. This section will either make or break your bid, and in turn, make or break the experience you will have with your landscape management provider. Don’t exclude this or else!

The pricing section is another opportunity for the Apples-to-Apples review to come into play. Create detailed maps with highlighted areas of the service areas. Have a break down of each service (mowing, pruning, mulch, fertilization, annuals, irrigation etc.) with a price broken out for each section. This may make more work for your respondents but it is invaluable for the final review of the proposals. Quality landscape companies will appreciate this sort of breakout because it puts all respondents on the same page, with no room for cutting corners from Low Buck Chuck. You may also want to request Unit Pricing for replacement of certain trees and shrubs on your property. This way, you’re not surprised when you get that first enhancement proposal and it’s thousands more than you expected.

Asking for a simple lump sum may result in bids that are all over the board with no ability to compare discrepancies. For your review process, whether it’s with a board of directors, a property engineer, a purchasing department or a general manager, bring answers to the table. It will make you and your property look good.
RFP Sample Language

Enough about the how; let’s get down to the real meat of what you’re going to need. The next section will give you some sample language to use in your next RFP. We’ve taken language from past RFP’s that were successful, we’ve created language that will help qualify respondents, and we’ve included some RFP tricks that will help you weed out (again, pun intended!) landscape maintenance companies that you may not want on your list of potential bidders.
Sample Introduction/Objective

Starting off Right

Depending on your objectives, the formality of your organization and the legal requirements of your proposal, the following sample Introduction may help you in shaping up the first few pages of your RFP. The tone of the following language is be business professional, suitable for a typical property but probably not suitable for the more formal Government entities.

Dear <Landscape Maintenance Company>:

<Landscape Maintenance Company> invites you to submit a proposal in accordance with the enclosed Request for Proposals (RFP) for Landscape Management Services for <Community/Service Area>.

One objective through this RFP is to find the best possible landscape maintenance company at the best possible value for our community/organization. Your company has been chosen to receive this RFP due to your already reputable credentials, colleague references and industry esteem. Though we are looking to qualify your ability on our property further, we are also looking to create a trusting relationship with a team that will be pro-active on our property, well presented to our clients, and flexible in our needs. We invite you to prove this through the RFP.

Another objective of this RFP is to retrieve consistent results that specifically reflect our needs as presented in this RFP from each bidder. We expect that the specifications will be proposed in the quantity exactly as requested with no variations, utilizing the pricing forms provided. Bidders that vary from exact specifications and/or the provided pricing forms will be immediately disqualified. We have accountability measures in place to assure all numbers presented will be fulfilled upon award, so do not cheat scope. Additionally, we’ve attached the maps with service areas highlighted. Measure each service area, count every tree, and estimate accurately and wholly.

In addition and in conjunction with these underlying objectives, responses must fulfill each RFP requirement as presented in the RFP.

For more sample RFP language or for consultation on your next RFP, click here!
Sample Instructions

*Divining into the Logistics*

It’s time to get down to the nitty-gritty. In the instructions, you’re laying down the rules which actually can help you avoid unwanted bidders. By requesting certain information like bid bonds, particular insurance limits, and/or licenses, qualifying reputable companies can be an easy process. Below is some sample language that will help get you started by making the best of what seems to be a pretty routine section:

**Instructions**

**Due Date.** Sealed proposals must be received no later than 5:00 p.m. on <insert date> at the following address: <insert address>. Label the sealed proposals with your company name, the RFP project title, and the address listed above with Attn: <insert contact>.

**Bid Bond.** Each Proposer shall submit a Bid Bond with the Proposal for a value of 10% (or 5%, depending on the size) of the annual proposed value. The bid bond ensures that the winning landscape maintenance company will accept the work awarded, despite possible inaccurate pricing on behalf of the Proposer, errors in the estimation, or other reasons that may alter the company’s ability to accept the work.

**Evaluation of Proposals.** All proposals shall be thoroughly evaluated. Proposals shall be evaluated on company qualifications, experience, price and company track record of intangible assets (pro-activity, professionalism, etc.). <Insert Organization> reserves the right to reject any and all proposals and to choose the winning proposal that it deems in the best interest of the <organization/community>.

**Required Pre-Bid Meeting.** A required pre-bid meeting, property introduction and site tour will be held on <insert date>. All interested proposers must attend this meeting. Attendance does convey an interest and dedication from the bidder, and therefore is required to all interested bidders, but does not commit companies to submit a proposal.

For more sample RFP language or for consultation on your next RFP, click [here](#)!
One of the best ways you can get your bidders on the same page is to have a scope of work that is clearly defined and accounted for. Require that each service area be measured and/or counted, and request that bids are based on the exact number of frequencies presented in the RFP. Below is some helpful language to get you started:

### Specifications

Proposer must provide the following measurements:

*<Insert Service Area #1>*

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total square feet of turf area by type:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bermuda</td>
<td>___________________(sf)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoysia</td>
<td>___________________(sf)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahia</td>
<td>__________________(sf)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total square feet of ornamental bed areas:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ornamental Bed Areas</td>
<td>________________(sf)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mulch Quantity</td>
<td>____________________(per application)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total square feet of annual flower bed areas:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Flower Bed Areas</td>
<td>________________(sf)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Flowers Proposed</td>
<td>______________(per rotation)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Frequency of mowing is determined by the type of turf being serviced and adjusted to coincide with seasonal growth rates to maintain a consistent, healthy appearance of the turf. Scheduled cuts missed due to inclement weather will be made up as soon as possible, or credited to client. A calendar showing mowing frequencies shall be provided and property manager shall be notified after each service.

**Bermuda Turf** will be cut forty-four (44) times per year with a reel type mower.

**Zoysia Turf** will be cut forty-four (44) times per year with a rotary type mower.

**Bahia Turf** will be cut twenty-one (21) times per year with a rotary type mower.

For more sample RFP language or for consultation on your next RFP, click [here](#)!
Include a Calendar like the one below with every RFP and let your bidders know that the services provided will be tracked throughout the year:

Sample Specifications and Scope of Work

Frequency Calendar

Include a Calendar like the one below with every RFP and let your bidders know that the services provided will be tracked throughout the year:

Calendar of Services
Sample Qualifications

Getting to Know Your Bidders

Unlike the Scope of Work and Pricing sections, the Qualification section can be a tad bit less rigid and defined. Yes, you need to ask for things like licenses, financials, company history and you may want to include consistent “Qualification Entry Forms” that keep all responses consistent for ease of review. But this is also your opportunity to identify which company has the most passion and interest in your property. It also gives you an idea as to the communication level, pro-activity and listening skills your prospective landscape company offers. Remember, your objectives will define the information you’ll receive from bidders. Here’s some helpful language for you to help not only further qualify your bidders, but to unravel the specialties, qualities and ambitions of your bidders.

Qualifications of Proposer

References. Provide three references (contact name, title, phone, email, property name, scope and location) from similar projects within a 50 mile radius of the property identified in this RFP. References from locations that are not within this radius and for properties that are not similar in size, scope or type to the proposed property may be considered unresponsive.

Property Assessment. Provide a one to two page assessment of the current property conditions along with proposed solutions to identified issues. Also present three enhancement recommendations to areas on the property of your choice.

Beyond the Scope. It is the intent of this RFP to attain a landscape maintenance company that goes above and beyond the scope of work and specifications. Describe how your organization will be pro-active on our property and how you will communicate with on-site management. Include in this overview responses from past clients that speak to your ability as a pro-active, flexible and highly communicative company.

For more sample RFP language or for consultation on your next RFP, click here!
Sample Proposal Pricing

Comparing Apples-to-Apples

This is where the rubber meets the road. Your pricing sheets will have a lot to do with your ability to compare each bid, apples-to-apples. If you’re requiring bidders to include measurements and counts (as discussed on page 18) for every part of your properties service areas, than the hybrid of these pricing pages with your scope of work and map will allow a detailed and meaningful review and evaluation. See below for a good start to putting your pricing pages together:

### Landscape Management Service Pricing Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Area #1</th>
<th>Description of Services</th>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
<th>Year 3</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Mowing</td>
<td></td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Includes edging, string trimming, blowing and/or vacuuming, and weeding.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Fertilization/Chemical Treatments/Turf Renewal</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Irrigation</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Mulch</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Annual Flowers</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Detailing</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Includes shrub pruning, tree pruning, palm pruning, property polding and general cleanup.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Total (I thru VI)</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td>$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Color code your map into sections that correlate to this pricing section!
Sending the RFP

You’ve got the RFP together, and now you have to figure out what companies will receive it. You have the two or three companies you know you want on the list, but how do you find other potential candidates? Googling “professional landscape company” isn’t doing anything for you and finding the time to research other companies is unlikely.
Issuing the RFP requires a targeted approach. Remember, the companies that you send the RFP to will have a qualifying effect for your bidders. It may be tempting, but don’t send your RFP to just anybody, or everybody for that matter. In your attempt to attract as many bidders as possible, you’ll lose qualified bidders. It’s a good rule of thumb to give your RFP to three to five different landscape maintenance companies. Reputable companies often walk away when 10+ bidders are involved because the chance of winning plummets. Tell each bidder that they have been chosen specifically to bid on the project (again, for government bids or quasi-governmental bids, this is probably not a possible option).

If you’re looking to find more landscape maintenance companies that are qualified and reputable, head to some great resources that will help you qualify, like the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET). Here, you’ll find regional and national landscape companies that have been awarded the highest industry compliment possible.

Another great resource is Lawn and Landscape. Every year, they have the “L&L Top 100” which lists the largest landscape firms in the nation. Look through the list and find some in your service area.
Need a Hand?

This e-book is a great start to putting together the perfect RFP. But if you don’t have the time to put it together, it doesn’t help anybody. To get some help from the pro’s, click here! We’ll assess your needs, focus on your priorities, and put together the perfect RFP to get the best landscape maintenance provider on your property. Or, feel free to request an RFP template, which is available through the contact information on the following page.

This e-book was created by a team who has written and reviewed hundreds of RFP’s. It was also written with the help of these fantastic sources:

- Landing Big Sales with an RFP by Tom Searcy
- RFP’s Suck! by Tom Searcy
- Whale Hunting: How to Land Big Sales and Transform Your Company
  By Tom Searcy and Dr. Barbara Weaver Smith
This e-book is a guide to help property managers, board members or anyone else that is responsible for creating RFP’s. We hope you find it helpful, but the sample language and advice in this RFP does not guarantee the success of your RFP process. Many RFP’s differ in formalities, legalities and structure. Use discretion as to your organization’s or community’s restrictions and requirements. Austin Outdoor and/or Yellowstone Landscape Group, Inc. accepts no responsibility for RFP’s created using this e-book.