

Water Conservation Is Good For Business

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Irrigation contractors and water utilities interested in water conservation should not be in conflict. A partnership between the San Antonio Irrigation Association and San Antonio Water System has pushed forward several conservation programs, improved irrigation standards that benefit the community, help meet water conservation goals and improve business for qualified irrigators.

It can be a challenge to compete with low-bid competitors who are not concerned with quality. It takes more supplies and time to put in efficient irrigation systems. Unfortunately, a bad system can be installed for about half the cost as a good one. The poor quality system will most likely not have head to head coverage, appropriate landscape zoning for water need, water may overspray to impervious surfaces and the customer will not be able to use sophisticated program tools. In the long-run the poor quality system clearly wastes water.

Convincing customers to spend a lot more on an efficient system can be a hard sell in the irrigation industry. Homeowners who have little or no background in irrigation may trust the low-bid contractor who convinces them that the higher value system is not necessary. Even more challenging is convincing a builder to put in a top-notch system. When a builder is offering irrigation systems as an “upgrade” to buyers or even requiring them on the property, their primary concern is not long-term efficiency. Their goal is to install an irrigation system that meets minimum requirements and then to make a profit by marking up the cost of the system for the home buyer.

Regulation helps resolve some of these problems. Rules should begin with standards for design, extend to plan review and then inspection after installation. Additional water waste rules that prohibit irrigation spray from hitting impervious surfaces or running off the landscape also help. When rules exist and are enforced, the low-bid contractor must improve or get out of the irrigation business. When builders and homeowners learn that they will have water waste violations resulting from bad systems, they are forced to upgrade them. Eventually this changes the marketplace standards.

Several years ago San Antonio irrigators took the lead in asking the City of San Antonio to upgrade standards above those already required by the State of Texas and to require plan reviews and inspections for systems. In order to accomplish this, they proposed that all irrigators register with the City of San Antonio and be required to pull a permit for each irrigation system they would put in place. The revenue from this permit process pays for the inspection staff necessary to review plans and on-site work.

It might sound as though irrigators in San Antonio have created extra work for themselves. However, what they have accomplished is making it very difficult for unprofessional irrigators to compete in the marketplace. “Fly by night” irrigators who put in poor quality systems do not pass the initial plan review phase or the inspection

phase. The cost of having irrigation systems has increased, but the rate of new systems going in has not gone down. Business for the professional irrigator has improved and the non-qualified installer cannot compete. Systems quality is steadily improving.

Water waste rules also generate business for qualified irrigators. Badly designed systems cannot be run without having water run onto impervious surfaces. In San Antonio it is always against city rules to have water running down the street from watering activity. Homes or businesses with overspray problems are warned and then given water waste tickets if the problem persists. Systems must be changed to direct spray away from street and parking lot surfaces. This often requires extensive upgrades that can only be completed by experienced irrigators.

A new requirement that all large properties submit an “Irrigation Analysis” once per year to San Antonio Water System will also generate new business for irrigators. The analysis can be completed by non-irrigators. However, most property management companies are hiring irrigators to review their system for breaks, misaligned heads, overspray and other problems. Once they are presented with a detailed report on these problems, they usually ask the irrigator for a bid to correct them. The new requirement does not actually specify that repairs have to be done, but since the problems are documented on the report the site manager is well-advised to correct them to avoid water waste tickets. Completion of the “Irrigation Analysis” service is an excellent way to increase off-season winter revenue.

Streamlining customer complaint processes for poorly designed systems is another way to improve irrigation standards. When rules are in place at both the city level and the state level, consumers have more recourse when they discover their new home has a sub-par irrigation system. It is important that the consequences of the poor systems follow not just the irrigator, but also the builder. This provides an incentive for the builders to hire better irrigation companies in the future.

Another conservation effort that serves the expert irrigator well is new technology. Customers are more and more interested in knowing how to get the best value possible from their irrigation expenses. Irrigators who are familiar with the latest smart controllers, reclaim systems, and retrofits are in high demand. In communities where rebates are possible for system improvements, the irrigators are welcome to market their services by letting customers know about rebates they may earn by making improvements.