

Roll with the Changes

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Flexibility keeps Lawn and Driveway Services in business



For temporary erosion and stabilization, straw mulch was applied and disc anchored at this site. A hydromulch was also applied along the roadway to prevent erosion.

Photos courtesy of Lawn and Driveway Services.

Lawn and Driveway Services in Morris, Minn., has learned to change with the times. That flexibility has enabled owner Vicky Dosdall to stay in business over the years, even in a down economy.

Dosdall bought the business from her former husband in 2002, it began in 1975 with sod installation and driveway sealing for the residential sector. Now the company concentrates on turf establishment and erosion control in boulevard restoration jobs, as well as government roadwork.

Dosdall retained the name of the business. She learned years ago that if a business is successful, don't change the name even if it changes direction.

"I tell everyone we farm in the road ditch," Dosdall says. "We work the area

up, we fertilize it, seed it, straw mulch it and crimp it and any areas that would have a larger potential for erosion, and we use erosion control blankets.”

She says, “We are the first one to the site on a job because we do the silt fence and floatation curtain, because all of that needs to go in prior to any dirt being moved. Then we’re the last one there; as the dirt gets shaped up and graded, we do the final seeding.”



ERTEC’s GR-8 Guard is used on this round grate to reduce sedimentation. Lawn and Driveway is a distributor for the company.

For boulevard restoration work, after crews have put in new water and sewer lines, curbs, gutters and sidewalks, Lawn and Driveway Services will fertilize, prepare topsoil, drill-seed the area and hydromulch. When necessary, the company will also apply an erosion control blanket.

An increase in regulations means construction contractors need her company more. Dosdall notes, “Years ago, we’d get a call and they’d say it’s been ready a couple of days and we could go there anytime we wanted to. There’s no more of that now. Contractors, for the most part, have been very diligent about keeping seeding contractors informed as to when they’ll need to be there. Years ago, if there was a 5-mile seeding job, you didn’t go in and seed until all 5 miles are ready. Now, we may be there two or three times and going a mile or two at a time. That adds to the cost, but you have to do it because of the regulations.”

Dosdall still gets some last-minute calls. “Everybody gets busy, and that’s understandable, but the thing is, because we slice-in the silt fence, we need to be doing the line locating at the same time. They may say they’ve done one and you’re taking a risk by running off somebody else’s line locate. That creates some issues because you don’t want your guys hitting a line,” she says.

“We use John Deere tractors, diggers, disks and grass seeders, and our mulchers are traditionally used for farmers in their feedlots, and we modify

them to use them for the ditch work. Mulching is a very important part of the business, because when you're straw mulching, you're stopping up to 80 percent of the erosion with the mulching and the crimping. There's very little seeding that we do that we do not put some type of a cover on top," she explains.

The boulevard restoration jobs include 30-day maintenance follow-up, focusing primarily on watering to ensure the seeding gets off to a good start. After that, the landowners take over. Dosdall provides them with an information sheet that educates them on what kind of seed and mulch was planted, and how to water and mow the lawns.

"Homeowners can do more damage to their lawn than anything," Dosdall points out. "If you mow it too short and have a dull blade, it will pull out the roots and then you hurt the structure."

As for the roadwork, Lawn and Driveway Services does not choose the seed and fertilizer used, that's the decision of the engineering firm, which Dosdall says usually follows specifications from the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

"It makes it a lot easier for the contractors when private engineering firms follow the Mn/DOT specs, because that's the bible of the construction industry," she says. "Some construction engineers will write their own specs and it's so detailed and nitpicky, and that little word 'incidental' will show up, and it's really tough. It's so competitive out there with the economy the way it is, you better know what you are bidding. Sometimes it feels like you're going to the casino when you're bidding these jobs."

Mn/DOT allows for a certified type 3 straw mulch that is weed-free. "The wheat field has to be inspected prior to it being harvested to make sure it's free of weeds. You're ensuring that you're not bringing some invasive weed or a thistle to the project," says Dosdall. "We don't use a lot of it; it adds to the cost of the project. A lot of times, if we're doing natives or a commercial lot that's close to homeowners, they might spec that product."

As far as using organic products, Dosdall notes that while there are some compost logs being used in the industry, it's not so much the case in her region. There's a lack of supply, and it adds to the price.

"It would be wonderful if we could incorporate compost into the soil. We all know it would greatly enhance the grass, but until there's money out there, I can't see where that's ever going to happen."

Dosdall says her company faces two main challenges right now. One is finding straw mulch. Dairy farms are buying most of it, as farmers aren't raising as much wheat as they once did, and it's starting to cost more to find mulch because of supply and demand, she says.

Another is finding work in a bidding environment where some companies are bidding low just to get work, even if it means they're not meeting their operating costs and may eventually fold shop, she says.

"I always hope that a contractor will use my quote based on past performance and the working relationship we established," Dosdall says. "Part of the problem right now is everybody is bidding so cheap and it's so terribly competitive out there. If there's a difference of \$1,000 on \$20,000 worth of work, they're always going to take that low quote. But, there are times, not real often, when a contractor has used my quote because of the poor working relationship they had with the low bid. They say for that \$1,000, they'd prefer to go with my company because the other one gave them so many headaches."

Dosdall keeps her company lean. She has two full-time and two part-time employees, plus a secretary, so she doesn't feel the pressure to take jobs that don't generate a decent income in order to keep people working. She keeps projects within a 100-mile radius.



In a critical area of the stream, sliced silt fence, straw logs and rocks were used to ensure that no silt would escape to the stream.

She is also a distributor for Western Excelsior, ERTEC Environmental Systems and Sacramento Bag erosion control products. "Having these items to distribute definitely gives me an opportunity to make more money," she says. "Because I'm out on the western side of Minnesota, I'm about 160 miles from Minneapolis/St. Paul and 100 miles from Fargo, N.D., no one in this area inventories any product other than me."

She maintains a lot of inventory for companies that do private yard work. "They don't want to sit with a lot of inventory, so they can call me on Tuesday afternoon and say they need 20 rolls of rapid degradable wood fiber blanket and I'll meet them whenever they want [at the shop] so they can take it from my inventory and put it right on the job the same day," Dosdall says.

Dosdall attributes the success of her company to keeping the lines of communication open with engineers and other contractors and also to the work ethic of her employees.

"They work very hard," she notes. "It's very important, not only to myself, but to my employees, that when we leave the job, that it looks good," says Dosdall. "We take pride in what we do. I get very few callbacks. If we do, it's because Mother Nature has created some problems after we've been there."

She also cites the importance of keeping equipment updated and in proper order to minimize breakdowns.

Dosdall says she also gets work because hers is a WBE (woman business enterprise) classified as minority status.

"I do sell some materials because of that, but I've never tried to gouge that system," she says. "I don't want people to say 'I have to use her and she's so high, she's making a killing.' I've never played that game that way." Rather, Dosdall endeavors to promote cooperation among competitors.

Dosdall does the administrative work for the Minnesota Seeding Contractors Association and works hard to get other seeding contractors involved because they can increase their knowledge through interaction with Mn/DOT representatives and engineers.

"I think it's very important for contractors to become involved in their industry. I believe we can help each other," she says. "There are times when I've gotten in a bind and I call someone and ask if there's any chance they could do something for me; I've done things for other people, too.

"I think that's what we need to do in this industry because of the rules and regulations. When someone says you have to be somewhere, and you've got to get mulch and silt fence in, and you're in the middle of a job 80 miles in the other direction, we need to be able to work together. There are a few of us who do that and some who don't want to cross that path. People need to look at that more."

Carol Brzozowski is a member of the Society of Environmental Journalists and has written extensively about environmental issues for numerous trade journals for more than a decade. She resides in Coral Springs, Fla.