



Landscaping recognized as Essential Business

by Bryan Tolar, Tolar Capitol Partners, Inc.

With the rapid rise in Coronavirus illnesses and educational efforts, we have all been thrust into a situation that is unfamiliar and unsettling. Who knew the day would come when we would be fighting over toilet paper? Worship services, family celebrations, school activities, plus so much more have all been cancelled, suspended, or adjusted by incorporating new social distancing parameters.

Meanwhile, businesses have had to get creative through work-from-home initiatives, food services, online grocery shopping...or sadly by having to close their doors. As the weeks wear on, the opportunity to re-open for some becomes more challenging regardless of what red-tape reductions can be made and federal relief funding can do. It's reality...and it's dire.

When state and local quarantine were understandably initiated to help stop the spread of Coronavirus, the [U.S. Department of Homeland Security released guidance on the Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce](#). It sounds pretty important - because it is. As local governments worked to establish a list of jobs and services allowed to operate during this crisis, most looked to this document for "Essential Businesses" that are suggested to remain open and active.

While many in agriculture celebrated farm and forestry operation clearly delineated as essential, not all of agriculture was initially as fortunate. Georgia's \$8 billion landscape sector was only referenced in vague terms and not listed by name, leaving room for interpretation by government officials.

Landscaping is big business and a large employment sector. Its reach goes far beyond manicured lawns and photogenic beauty. For agriculture, it means selling and installing sod and nursery plants, irrigation, soil amendments, groundcovers, trees, along with patios and other hardscapes, plus the use of inputs including fertilizers and pesticides. Like we said, it is big business, but it goes a step further in terms of service.

Landscape professionals have experience and knowledge to provide needed services that help avoid compounding problems during these uncertain times. Unlike most of their clients, landscapers are trained and licensed, similar to farmers, for the safe application of pesticides and the use of nutrients that improve plant health, reduce insects, control weeds, and protect the environment. Many of their customers, especially in metro areas, are physically unable to perform outside work themselves, so for them, there are no other options. Managing private and public properties with the proper equipment and training allows them to take immediate action that could otherwise jeopardize public safety. Another important characteristic of landscape service is that it is social distancing friendly as these the workers rarely come in contact with their clients – an important benefit during these times.

Last week, as more local governments rolled out "Stay in Place" orders to limit the reach of Coronavirus, the **Georgia Urban Agriculture Council (UAC)**, a trade organization made up of over 500 member companies in agribusiness, services, growers, and vendors, reached out to local leaders

in droves to implore their inclusion of these businesses as essential. Atlanta, Georgia's largest city and biggest hub of landscape services, initially said no to the request. That triggered action by Commissioner of Agriculture Gary Black and his staff, local lawmakers, and other allies, that eventually saw Atlanta Mayor Keisha Bottoms reverse course. We are thankful to Atlanta and nearly all local governments for being supportive of the industry and agreeing to include landscaping as an essential business.

Thankfully, on March 28, 2020, the Department of Homeland Security updated their previously mentioned guidance document to include landscapers in their list of others "providing services that are necessary to maintaining the safety, sanitation, and essential operation of residences, businesses and buildings." In response, UAC immediately provided outreach and resources for employees, vendors, and employers of landscape service companies to help them navigate local law enforcement. These resources can be found at www.urbanagcouncil.com/coronavirus-industry-updates.

With increased information and illness projections, all Georgian's should support and embrace Governor Kemp's actions to enact a statewide Stay-In-Place initiative. The Georgia Urban Agriculture Council can't resolve toilet paper wars, but they did provide clarity, sought assistance from allies, and communicated effectively with the landscape industry and local governments. These are challenging times and that's when real leadership makes the most difference. May God bless those impacted by these illnesses and hear the prayers of those working for solutions.

Bryan Tolar of Tolar Capitol Partners, Inc. provides government affairs services for the Georgia Urban Agriculture Council. For more information on UAC, go to www.urbanagcouncil.com.

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