

PROGRAM AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The Urban Forestry Program is responsible for the care of an estimated 325,000 trees along city streets and within the managed portions of 262 parks. City of Austin municipal code defines a public tree as ‘a tree with at least two-thirds of its trunk diameter on public property’ as described below in the excerpt from the City of Austin Trees and Vegetation Ordinance (4).

§ 6-3-1 DEFINITIONS.

In this chapter:

(6) PUBLIC PROPERTY means real property owned or controlled by the city with unrestricted public access, excluding a utility or drainage easement on private property.

(7) PUBLIC TREE means a tree with at least two-thirds of its trunk diameter on public property.

Source: 1992 Code Sections 10-6-4, 15-10-3, and 16-7-1 ; Ord. 031023-10; Ord. 031211-11.

However, the Urban Forestry Program is not the only entity tasked with managing the urban forest. The diverse and varied tree related responsibilities of different city departments is outlined by the Tree Coordination Efforts Organizational Chart (1) and further detailed here:

The Urban Forestry Program: Responsible for the planting, maintenance and removal of trees within the right-of-way along city streets, as well as trees within managed park land, municipally owned golf courses and other properties. Other responsibilities include the review of actions which may affect tree health on public property. The Urban Forestry Program is the primary agency which responds to after hours, emergency tree issues during storms and high wind events.

The City Arborist Program: Responsible for the permitting of actions which will affect tree health on private property. Other responsibilities include administration of the City of Austin Oak Wilt Program and the Urban Forest Grant Program.

Austin Energy: Municipally owned electric utility of the City of Austin operated as an enterprise and is a Tree Line USA agency. Responsible for the administration of the Tree of the Year program. Austin Energy is also responsible for tree planting within right-of-ways, which is accomplished in the following ways:

1) NeighborWoods – A program that identifies neighborhoods that lack sufficient tree canopy. This program specifically targets right-of-ways and identifies and marks the best locations for trees in front of each property. Homeowners who pledge to plant and care

for new trees are provided the right tree for the right location from a variety of species. Austin Energy funds the distribution of about 3,600 trees a year through this program, with about 25,000 trees distributed since 2002. The program is administered by TreeFolks, a local non-profit organization.

2) Austin Community Trees – This program specifically targets private property adjacent to right-of-ways. ACT plants trees along streets and sidewalks, potentially cooling daytime temperatures in neighborhoods by up to four degrees. The ACT program has planted almost X,XXX trees since 2005.

3) Large Trees for City Streetscapes – Created in 2004 to mitigate the urban heat island effect. Provides 5-inch caliper trees to shade City right of ways and sidewalks in commercial and public areas such as downtown. The number of tree plantings varies from year to year, however 2009 totaled 65.

4) Tree Trimming Program- Over the past 10 years, Austin Energy has funded the planting of an additional 9,000 trees to replace trees removed during the tree trimming process due to poor health or because too much pruning would be required to provide proper clearance from power lines.

Solid Waste Services: Responsible for ensuring trees on private property comply with city code including those which create blind corners. Other responsibilities include collection of yard trimmings and brush.

Austin Water Utility: Responsible for the disposal of waste wood generated by the City of Austin through an award-winning recycling program. Waste wood is chipped and combined with treated sewage sludge, then composted, cured and screened to become an organic soil amendment sold as DilloDirt. Other responsibilities include removal of trees which threaten to or have fallen into bodies of water within the City of Austin as well as the management of City owned forest preserves kept undeveloped for the protection of watersheds.

Public Works: Responsible for the removal of visibility obstructions of traffic signs and signals caused by both publicly and privately owned trees. Other responsibilities include removal of tree debris from alleys as well as after-hours, emergency response to debris in roadways (down tree limbs).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Operational Goals

Timeliness

Background: The Urban Forestry Program is the primary agency which responds to emergency tree issues after normal business hours and received 340 such requests during fiscal year 2009.

Goal: Respond to emergency situations within 1 hour

Background: The Urban Forestry Program received 1,962 routine maintenance requests during fiscal year 2009, the majority of which were submitted by private citizens. Routine maintenance requests are considered over-due after 30 days.

Goal: Respond to routine requests within 10 days

Background: The Urban Forestry Program reviews all utility line clearance work to be performed on all property owned by the City of Austin.

Goal: Review and return utility vegetation work plans within 10 business days

Quality of Work

Background: Submittal of accomplishment reports provide hard numbers which show the successes and efficiency of the Urban Forestry Program.

Goal: Stay informed of current events within the department using weekly work order progress updates, weekly forestry staff meetings and monthly accomplishment reports

Background: Meeting expectations, and exceeding them where possible, provides the Urban Forestry Program with ammunition to request additional funding to add program staff and increase the ability to perform proactive work.

Goal: Assign work to in-house crew and contractor crews with set timelines and measures of efficiency

2) Budget

Increase the Urban Forestry Program's general fund budget to accommodate additional employees and equipment

Background: The annual budget of the Urban Forestry Program is approximately \$1.5 million – which is about 3% of the budget of the Parks and Recreation Department. As of October 2010 the Urban Forestry Program will consist of 24 full time regular employees, 1 part time administrative assistant and 2 interns. An informal survey of other successful urban forestry programs from across the country found that the Urban Forestry Program is currently understaffed. Based on the number of trees for which the Program is responsible, it is currently understaffed by 35 – 50 employees.

The budget (3) of the Urban Forestry Program includes actual spending from fiscal year 2010 and projected budget for fiscal year 2011. The Forestry Personnel Organizational Chart (2) shows the structure of the Urban Forestry Program, and provides names and titles. The fiscal year for the City of Austin is October 1 – September 30.

Year 1 (2011): 1. Increase the Urban Forestry Program's general fund budget to \$2 million
2. Increase number of employees to 30

Year 2 (2012): 1. Increase the Urban Forestry Program's general fund budget to \$2.5 million
2. Increase number of employees to 35

Year 3 (2013): 1. Increase the Urban Forestry Program's general fund budget to \$3 million
2. Increase number of employees to 40

Year 4 (2014): 1. Increase the Urban Forestry Program's general fund budget to \$3.5 million
2. Increase number of employees to 45

Year 5 (2015): 1. Increase the Urban Forestry Program's general fund budget to \$4 million
2. Increase number of employees to 50

Utilize the Urban Forest Replenishment Fund and Planting for the Future Fund

Background: New development in the city of Austin must be approved through a site review process which allows different city departments to comment on proposed changes. The City Arborist Program is responsible for ensuring that impacts to trees on private property comply with city code, while the Urban Forestry Program mirrors that effort for trees on public property.

When developers are unable to comply with code, they must mitigate for damages which occur to trees, including any trees removed. Mitigation by planting replacement trees on the same site is most preferable. However, if developers are unable to reasonably accommodate replacement trees on the same site, they are allowed to make monetary payments. Mitigation for impacts to trees on private property goes to the Urban Forest Replenishment Fund (UFRF) and mitigation for impacts to trees on public property goes to the Planting for the Future Fund (PFF).

Although the UFRF is managed by the City Arborist Program, it supplies the Urban Forestry Program with new trees to be planted on public property including parks and medians. The UFRF also funds the Urban Forest Grant Program which was established to promote urban forest conservation and other projects which benefit Austin's urban forest.

The PFF is managed by the Parks and Recreation Department. It is used exclusively for planting trees and is funded by mitigation for impacts to trees on public property as well as about \$20,000 in annual donations from private donations via the Austin Energy monthly bill.

Goal: Utilize more of this money

3) Public Education

Improve the Quality, Volume and Timeliness of Information Available to the Public through the Urban Forestry Program Website

Background: The Urban Forestry Program utilizes its own website as the main conduit for conveying information to the general public, other city departments and commercial tree care companies. The Program strives to keep the most current and relevant information on the website regarding on-going projects, volunteer opportunities and tree care practices. Information on the website also includes tree ordinance Chapter 6-3 Trees and Vegetation. The Program updates information in-house.

Goal: Continue using the website as a source for general information

Goal: Convey timely information regarding on-going projects and volunteer opportunities

City of Austin, Urban Forestry Program Website

<http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/parks/forestry.htm>

Outreach and Community Involvement

Background: The Urban Forestry Program accounts for approximately 50% of all volunteer hours donated to the Parks and Recreation Department annually.

Goal: Continue providing opportunities for community involvement through volunteer work

Background: In the fall of 2008, the Urban Forestry Program launched the Urban Forest Steward Class, a 20 hour classroom program designed to teach citizens about basic tree care and urban forestry. Urban Forest Stewards are encouraged to assume leadership roles in tree planting or tree maintenance volunteer projects. Austin Parks Foundation adopted the program in the fall of 2010 as it's own, though the Urban Forestry Program still provides guidance.

Goal: Continue training volunteers as Urban Forest Stewards

Goal: Utilize existing Urban Forest Stewards as group leaders to assist with volunteer projects

Background: Leaf for a Leaf is a partnership between the City of Austin Library System and the Urban Forestry Program to promote the idea that borrowing books from a library instead of purchasing books is a form of recycling, which conserves forest products. Leaf for a Leaf also promotes the Urban Forest Steward Class.

Goal: Continue this program

4) Professional Standards

Maintain Tree City USA status and continue to pursue the National Arbor Day Foundation's Tree City Growth Award

Background: The City of Austin has been a Tree City USA for 18 years. Requirements for the designation of Tree City USA include presence of a Tree Board or Department, a tree care ordinance, a tree related program with an annual budget of at least \$2 per capita, an Arbor Day

observance with a Proclamation, and submittal of an application which documents these requirements, yearly.

The City of Austin received a Tree City Growth Award for calendar year 2008. This award is obtained by submitting an application to the National Arbor Day Foundation which demonstrates that yearly expenditures for tree programming has met or exceeded the previous year's budget and that the tree-related Department has improved its projects according to a provided point system requirement. The Urban Forestry Department intends to continue attaining the certification and award yearly, which shall entail meeting the standards set out by the National Arbor Day Foundation and improving programming in the department each year.

Goal: Fulfill requirements and submit application for Tree City USA status and Growth Award

Encourage Employees to Pursue ISA Certification

Background: The Urban Forestry Program currently employs seven ISA Certified Arborists, including a Municipal Specialist and a Utility Specialist.

Goal: Provide employees who do not yet have ISA certification the necessary opportunities to become a certified arborist

Goal: Provide employees with the necessary opportunities to maintain their ISA certification

Goal: Encourage employees to achieve other certifications beyond certified arborist such as Municipal Tree Specialist

Acquire Society of Municipal Arborists Accreditation

Background: Accreditation of the Urban Forestry Program by the Society of Municipal Arborists would show taxpayers why they should be proud of their forestry program, prove to them that their dollars are yielding results and give the City of Austin elected officials and managers something to boast about.

For a program to become accredited, the program must have an ISA certified arborist on staff; must be a current Tree City USA and have acquired a Tree City Growth award in the last five years; must show preference to private companies accredited by the Tree Care Industry Association; must incorporate the most recent industry standards for safety and tree care practices into the program; must pledge adherence to a code of ethics; and must have an urban forest management plan approved by the local governing body.

Goal: Acquire Society of Municipal Arborists Accreditation for the City of Austin, Urban Forestry Program

MANAGEMENT AND MAINTENANCE RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Identification and Removal of Hazardous Trees

Background: The Urban Forestry Program is defined as reactionary and spends the majority of its time responding to and addressing concerns and complaints from citizens. However, the Program performs proactive inspections and maintenance work whenever resources allow and is actively implementing a system of documenting tree maintenance in parks. The Documenting Park Maintenance SOP (12) shows how records will be maintained until a tree management software program is acquired.

Right-of-way tree work is largely handled by the Urban Forestry Program, with occasional assistance from other city departments where jurisdictions may overlap. The Urban Forestry Program is responsible for an estimated 125,000 trees along 2,187 miles of road ways. The Urban Forestry Program is responsible for about 200,000 trees within approximately 5,300 acres of actively managed parkland. The Urban Forestry Program assists in managing an additional 11,000 acres of land maintained as a combination of natural forests, watershed protection zones and greenbelts.

The Urban Forestry Program removes approximately 700 – 1000 trees every year. The Program's Fiscal Year 2009 Accomplishment Report (5) provides statistics for tree removals and pruning. A Public Tree Notice (11) is used as a door hanger to inform homeowners of removals or pruning work to be performed in their neighborhood before it happens.

Goal:

2) Continuing Care of Municipally Owned Trees

Background: The Urban Forestry Program strives to prevent the removal of any publicly owned native tree whenever possible. If a potentially hazardous tree is especially large or otherwise significant, the City of Austin may accept an elevated level of risk and the tree may be placed on the program's Monitor List. The decision to closely monitor and care for a publicly owned tree, instead of remove, is carefully scrutinized. The program's Hazard Evaluation Form (6) shows the criteria used to evaluate potentially hazardous trees.

The number of trees on the Monitor Tree List fluctuates as trees are regularly added and removed from the list for a variety of reasons. Potentially hazardous trees are often added to the list. Large and/or significant trees, or trees which may be impacted by construction activity, may be added to the list whether they show signs of decline or not. Trees are removed from the list when they are rehabilitated, show no signs of decline for an appropriate period of time after construction activity or are removed from public property.

Trees on the Monitor Tree List are closely monitored and inspected on a regular rotation; every 3 months, 6 months or 1 year. More frequent or special inspections are also made as necessary during construction activity or other major events.

Goal: Maintain the Monitor Tree List

The Parks and Recreation Department is currently working in conjunction with the Urban Forestry Board to establish a city wide canopy coverage goal as well as a proactive maintenance routine.

Goal: Establish a cyclic trimming program with a 5 year rotation

3) Planting New Trees

Planting

Background: The Parks and Recreation Department has a goal for the Urban Forestry Program to plant 2,000 trees per year.

For the 2010-11 planting season, professional forestry staff will be visiting each nursery in the area and selecting individual trees in an effort to acquire the highest quality stock available.

Comprehensive planting plans are developed months before the trees are installed. First, existing trees and potential planting locations are inventoried using handheld GPS/data collectors. This information is uploaded to GIS software to create a plan which shows existing trees and proposed trees, as well as other significant site characteristics. Planting days often involve at least one public relations element such as signage or a large event.

The Program's Fiscal Year 2009 Accomplishment Report (5) includes numbers of trees planted during the 2009-10 planting season. A more detailed description including numbers and locations can be found in the Planting Site Details spreadsheet (7). Longhorn Shores Planting Plan (10) is an example of a planting plan.

The Urban Forestry Program strives to increase species diversity by planting a wide variety of native and adapted trees, some of which are difficult or impossible to find in a nursery.

Goal: Study the possibility of starting a nursery to produce trees for planting on public property

Cooperation with Planting Partners

Background: Planners, park managers and neighborhood groups are involved whenever possible to ensure planting designs are sustainable and to avoid future site conflicts. Trees are usually planted by volunteers overseen by forestry staff or urban forest stewards. After planting new trees, supplemental water is provided for a minimum of two years by newly installed irrigation or by water truck.

The Urban Forestry Program strives to forge new partnerships with other organizations each year including non-profit groups and neighborhood associations. The Program also collaborates on new projects with existing partners such as Austin Energy, our municipal electrical utility. One such project planned for the 2010-11 planting season is the creation of an arboretum of small sized trees suitable for planting beneath power lines.

Goal: Form new and lasting partnerships with other organizations

Goal: Collaborate on new projects with existing partners

4) Enforcement of Ordinances

Review of New Development

Background: The Urban Forestry Program is responsible for the enforcement of ordinances intended to protect trees on public property. The City Arborist Program is responsible for enforcement of tree ordinances on private property – their website is listed below.

Goal: Play an active role in the site review process to ensure impacts to publicly owned trees during new development comply with city code

Damage to Publicly Owned Trees

Background: The Program's Fiscal Year 2009 Accomplishment Report (5) includes a total of paid claims for illegal damage to public trees. The Illegal Damage spreadsheet (8) is an example of the system we use to track illegal damage to public trees. The Trees and Vegetation ordinance (4) includes language concerning illegal damage to public trees.

Goal: Create a new position within the Urban Forestry Program to handle crash cases, illegal removals and site inspections of new development to ensure impacts to publicly owned trees comply with city code

5) Inventory

Sample Inventory

Background: In 2008, the City of Austin hired a private firm to perform a sample inventory. The data was used to infer conclusions about the entire street tree population. A conservative figure is estimated to be approximately 125,000 street trees. The result of their work can be viewed in their report (9) to the City of Austin.

The Urban Forestry Program is currently reviewing tree management software programs to assist in maintaining and updating the tree inventory as well as tracking the maintenance records of individual trees.

Goal: Acquire urban forest management software

Management of Existing Park Trees Inventory

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