

August 17, 2011

Mayor Lee Lefingwell
City Council

Dear Mayor and Council,

We are experiencing an unprecedented drought. A significant number of trees, including mature trees, are succumbing to drought stress in our city cemeteries. The Urban Forestry Board is concerned about the survival of the trees, including many heritage trees, in Austin's five public cemeteries. The Urban Forestry Board wrote to the Austin Parks and Recreation Department in 2010 concerning the condition and maintenance of the city cemeteries. We have not seen changes despite assurances from PARD that a management review initiative was forthcoming, including increased monitoring and inspections. The UFB still has many concerns concerning the maintenance of the grounds and care and watering of the trees. Drought conditions have us greatly concerned the trees are not receiving adequate watering.

The new state law 713.011 requires municipalities to care for the trees and grounds of public cemeteries. Much of the lack of tree care at cemeteries has been attributed to the existing contract with InterCare and lack of PARD oversight.

There is an urgent need to water trees at four of the city cemeteries right now, with the utmost urgency for Oakwood Cemetery and Oakwood Annex. Many heritage trees are dying right now at these two cemeteries, in spite of water being available on site. Austin Memorial Park Cemetery and Evergreen Cemetery also need watering badly since trees are suffering from the drought. The trees at Plummer Cemetery do not appear to show signs of stress at this time.

PARD's contract administrator, Gilbert Hernandez, states that the trees at all 5 cemeteries are being watered (Monday to Friday) for a few hours each day. This watering is not at all adequate. Evidence of some watering such as green grass under the trees is spotty and in Oakwood annex is non-existent. Trees continue to die at Oakwood and Oakwood Annex Cemeteries, and are in immediate need of water. This includes Austin Memorial Park and Evergreen.

The trees will survive if the cemetery contractor is instructed to water more. Established trees need 4 hours of water at one watering, every 2 weeks (with sprinklers such as the ones used at Oakwood), and only until the end of September (excluding periods of rain). InterCare has the staff to do this at the 4 cemeteries. In addition, these trees could be irrigated during the weekends with water trucks from PARD.

The UFB recommends the following:

- For PARD to immediately instruct the Cemetery Contractor to water all the trees every 2 weeks at Oakwood and Oakwood Annex Cemeteries. The trees need to get a sufficient amount of water, delivered slowly to the outer half of the drip line (4 hrs at one watering with sprinklers heads such as the ones used at Oakwood). The contractor can judge that sufficient amount of water was delivered to the trees by checking the soil 6-8 inches deep at the drip line.
- For PARD to instruct the Contractor to water all trees within the four city cemeteries at least every 2 weeks in sufficient quantity (4 hrs. with sprinklers head such as the ones used at Oakwood).
- For PARD to formulate a watering plan well in advance of the signing of the new cemetery operator contract. This watering plan should include specific details on the watering method to be used at each cemetery and how long to water to provide one inch water to the established trees every 2-3 weeks, delivered slowly and deeply and only from June to September, or longer depending on the drought.
- Allowing volunteers to hand water trees any time (allowed under the current water restrictions) and to provide connectors for pipes without faucets.

Sincerely,

Urban Forestry Board

Patrick Brewer *Chair*

Tom Hayes *Vice-Chair*

Peggy Maceo member

Nicholas Classen member

Ryan Fleming member

cc. Sara Hensley, Cora Wright