

# URBAN FORESTRY COMMISSION MEETING

August 12, 2009

Members Present: Ted Slegesky, Norma Bonham, Nancy Solodar, James Crowe

Also present: Julie Feier City Manager, Nancy MacCartney Parks Director, City Councilmen Terry Crow and Michael Glickert

Meeting called to order at 6:30 pm by President Ted Slegesky

Minutes were reviewed, James made a correction, Nancy made a motion to approve and Norma seconded, motion carried.

## New Business

- A) Forestry Study: Skip Kincade the Forestry Consultant to discussed the Urban Forestry Operations Review and Strategic Plan

### *List of Recommendations*

#### **Change City Code to Clarify Specific Responsibilities for City-owned Trees and Enhance Communication Between Departments**

The Administration should propose and Council should approve additions to Chapter 12.08 of the City Code that will clarify specific responsibilities for city-owned trees and enhance communication between departments. Identifying specific responsibilities in the City Code will increase awareness of trees as a part of the City's infrastructure that has value and needs a professional level of management. The new code language should require that all work on rights-of-way that impacts trees will receive input from the City Forester. Clear language in the City Code provides the administration a tool for requiring cooperation among various departments. The new language could be inserted into Section 12.08.0125 –Jurisdiction.

#### **Set Internal Policies to Increase Interdepartmental Communication and Cooperation**

The City should find means to increase interdepartmental communication and cooperation for plans and projects that may affect the urban forest. Without information on public and private projects, and enough time to review and comment on these plans and projects, potential problems may occur and opportunities will be missed that have immediate and long-term impacts on the urban forest. Many communities have sections of their tree ordinance that specify input from the City Forester. Other municipalities have formalized the communication process by creating a City departmental review and approval system for major projects. Plans or project descriptions of new construction or major repair projects (not routine departmental tasks) are circulated through each department for review and comment. Each department can weigh the impact the particular project has upon its responsibilities and comment on the project. The project cannot be implemented until all departments have approved the project as planned or requests for changes have been satisfied. Another mechanism to increase communication is for representatives from all departments (as needed) to be invited to a pre-construction meeting. At this meeting, the City Forester can personally interact with City staff and private contractors who will be involved in the project. The City Forester should be officially designated as part of the review, comment, and recommendation process.

#### **Update the City's Street Tree Inventory and Complete a Park Tree Inventory Increase Staffing and Other Resources**

The staffing levels and resources for urban forest management need to be increased in order to meet serious deficits in planting and pruning goals. A truly proactive and comprehensive urban forest management program requires trained and dedicated staff to oversee management and operational activities. Public safety is a primary reason for effective urban forest management. Additionally, the important duties of tree planting, tree maintenance, emergency response, plan review, development site inspection, project management, contract administration, interagency assistance and coordination, and citizen education, among others, require a sufficient level of staffing, equipment, and other program resources. A job analysis should be performed to determine if new or existing job classifications should be created, whether existing staff could be trained and reassigned or if new hiring is needed, and what level of funding is needed to support the positions. The increased staffing and resources are needed to meet the following deficits in meeting stated goals and policy:

**PLANTING** – Each year, University City’s *Annual Community Forestry Plan* stresses the desire to “plant as many trees as removed”. Without this goal, any city would eventually find its urban forest reduced and the benefits it provides greatly diminished, or gone.

The 2000 street tree inventory found 2,900 available planting spots that would adequately support a new street tree. During the last two reportable years, street tree removals in University City outpaced planting by an average of 185 trees per year. At this pace, the City would have no street trees by the year 2060. Faced with the same reality in the 1980s, the City of St. Louis found ways to increase tree planting during diminished budgets to achieve their goal of planting at least one tree for each tree removed. University City should make this a top priority as well. University City needs to increase the number of trees planted each year by at least 185 trees per year in order to keep the current street tree population stable or increasing. This number may change depending on the number of removals made each year. As the tree population continues to age, removals may increase. Options to consider for increasing the number of trees planted each year are as follows:

**Option 1** – Purchase more trees for planting on approved sites and using in-house staff to plant them. However, in-house staff is pressed already to reach planting and pruning goals, so it is doubtful this solution would be the best. One reason that planting numbers suffered in Fiscal Year 2006–2007 was the significant amount of time spent with storm clean-up. This indicates a less than ideal level of staffing, or funding to hire contractors, or both.

**Option 2** – Increase funding for tree planting and utilize contracted crews to perform the work. Many communities will contract the purchase and planting of trees as it allows smaller departments to stay on task with pruning and removals. Trees that are purchased and planted by contractors are also typically done so with one- or two-year guarantees.

**Option 3** – Set up a program for residents to share in the cost of getting a tree planted in the tree lawn adjacent to their property. Some municipalities will utilize this type of program to allow residents to get “on demand” tree planting. The City should still have priority areas where they can plan for tree planting in a given season. But if other property owners want a tree that is not currently scheduled, they can order it through the City. This allows the City to collect the cost (or a portion of it) from the property owner, then add it to the contractor’s list for that year. Property owners get the benefit of the contracted price, and the City has less planting expense while meeting “customer” demand. In addition to tree planting numbers, the City also needs to ensure that newly planted trees receive adequate follow-up care until they are fully established. Newly planted trees require at least three years of structural pruning, watering, and mulching to ensure successful establishment.

**PRUNING** – According to University City’s *Annual Community Forestry Plan*, “Pruning is the most important tool in the management plan; proper pruning can greatly extend the health, safety, and life of trees.” It is true that a strong program of periodic pruning (especially when trees are developing) will greatly increase the health of the tree and improve public safety as well. An effective and efficient means of making sure that all street trees receive adequate attention, including pruning, is to develop a systematic approach. University City’s program has attempted to achieve a cyclical seven-year pruning cycle. While a five-year

cycle provides a better quality tree population, the seven-year cycle is acceptable in a period of budget constraints. In order to achieve a seven-year cycle, University City would need to prune approximately 1,620 trees per year (based on a population of 11,339 street trees). In the last two reportable fiscal years, pruning goals fell short by 336 trees in Fiscal Year 2006–2007 and 129 trees in Fiscal Year 2007–2008. Cyclical pruning is performed on several trees along city blocks on a given day and results in a much more efficient method of pruning. Most cities elect to utilize a cyclical pruning program and defer citizen requests until the cyclical program reaches their street. If inspections identify high levels of risk associated with defective limbs or trees, then priority action can be taken. Otherwise the action should be deferred.

In order to meet the increased need for pruning, the City should consider an increase in funding to accommodate additional contract staff so City crews can meet cyclical pruning needs. The contracted work should be utilized to perform “on-demand” pruning for property owners. Consider alerting property owners that if a requested pruning service is not deemed to exceed risk thresholds, then the work will be deferred until the next pruning cycle hits their street. If the property owner wants it completed sooner, the City will make arrangements to have the Contractor perform the service and bill the property owner. Just as with the tree planting arrangement, property owners will have the advantage of receiving contractor prices and the assurance that a qualified company (selected by the City Forester) is performing the work. (In Fiscal Year 2007–2008, the contracted pruning cost was \$70 per tree.)

**REMOVALS** – According to University City’s *Annual Community Forestry Plan*, 337 trees were removed during each of the last two reportable fiscal years. This number is expected to increase as the street tree population continues to mature. Along with the aging tree population and increasing numbers of removals will be an increase in the number trees that are defective and pose potentially levels of risk. Situations where injury or property damage has occurred from falling trees are not isolated and are well documented in the media on a regular basis. Along with the potential for personal injury or property damage comes the probability of the responsible parties being held liable for any injuries or damages. Such lawsuits can and have resulted in costly judgments against the defendants. Public safety must be the primary concern in University City. Tree removals and pruning are a vital part of safety risk mitigation. The general tree population in the City is in good to fair condition; however, there are large trees with varying degrees of risk factors existing in the scaffold limbs, trunks, and roots. Consideration must always be made of area usage and the threat of falling limbs or trees to persons and property when putting a pruning and removal plan into action. External indicators of increased risk trees, such as obvious root zone activity, decay fungi, or included bark, require special attention to meet the public’s safety needs. Trees that display decay fungi or obvious signs of wood decay should be carefully monitored and evaluated for safety concerns and risk management. Trees with poor structure, such as those with co dominant leaders or multiple trunks, can pose a greater failure risk than trees with good structure. All City trees (especially trees in the large-size diameter class) with signs of decay and/or poor structure should be examined annually for signs of impending failure. The 2000 street tree inventory indicated a very low number of trees with high levels of risk that needed attention. This is, in large part, a result of the Forestry Division’s vigilance with removing high-risk trees. However, the number of removals needed because of declining tree health will likely increase as a result of the aging tree population. Updating the street tree inventory and scheduling regular inspections will assist with identifying anticipated needs.

#### **Utilized Contracted Forestry Crews for Specific Services**

Consideration should be given to utilizing contracted crews for specific services, but not as a total replacement for Forestry Division crews. When municipalities face the inevitable task of balancing needed levels of service with available funds, there is nearly always the discussion of utilizing contractors to perform some or all of its services. While using contracted crews may reduce the “personal level” of the service and reduce the City’s

visibility in performing vital City services, there can be cost savings if the contracted services are selected properly.

Going strictly all “in-house” or “all contract” is rarely in the best interest of a municipality. In the case of University City’s Forestry Division, this is especially true. The 2008 budget for the Forestry Division (including all personnel, equipment, vehicles, contractors, wood waste, and trees) was reported at \$361,439. Table 4 below shows the anticipated cost of utilizing contractors for all services (while retaining the City Forester) as \$455,512. This represents an increase of \$94,073 (an increase of over 26%.) While the current rates for contracted tree work are very competitive, they should be utilized to fill gaps and provide customized services such as property owner requests that are not part of the regularly scheduled activities of the Forestry Division. Utilizing them to fulfill all of the basic needs for pruning, removal, and planting would create considerable additional expense and reduce or eliminate many of the services not considered under “basic services”. These services include tree maintenance on park trees (including the municipal golf course), many of the outreach and educational services, specialized inspections, and services to other departments.

### **Initiate Planning for an Emerald Ash Borer Strategy and Response**

The 2000 street tree inventory indicates 1,330 ash (*Fraxinus*) trees along the streets of University City. A total of 774 (58.2%) of these trees are greater than 13 inches in diameter. Potential removal and replanting costs could exceed \$1 million dollars.

Emerald ash borer (*Agilus planipennis*) is an exotic insect that has caused the death of millions of ash trees since it was found in Michigan in 2002. It is very aggressive and continues to spread to other areas of the United States. It was recently found in southeastern Missouri. If it spreads to the St. Louis area, it will likely kill approximately 15% of ornamental trees in the area. Inventories have indicated an average of 15% ash trees in urban tree populations including streets, parks, yards, and green spaces. To date, very little has been found in the way of controls, and communities are bracing for large numbers of removals if it becomes established in the St. Louis area. Tens of millions were reported to have been killed in southeastern Michigan alone. Information about emerald ash borer can be found at <http://www.emeraldashborer.info/>.

### **Increase Public Awareness and Educational Programs**

As policies change and program direction shifts toward shared responsibilities with its citizenry, an active awareness and educational program will become more important. This will help to improve the connection that property owners feel with City government and the services and leadership it provides. Plan to hold additional classes on various tree topics including tree selection, planting, and basic tree care. Develop a set of emergency workshops and informational materials for homeowners if emerald ash borer is found in the St. Louis area. Workshops geared towards developers may be helpful to explain the City’s code requirements with tree preservation and replacement on development sites.

### **Improve the “Annual Community Forestry Plan”**

Improve and incorporate the “Annual Community Forestry Plan” into the City’s “Comprehensive Plan Update”. The current format of the City’s “Annual Community Forestry Plan” should be expanded to include detailed information about budgeted funds allocated and spent on various tree-related activities. In a period of challenged budgets, it becomes more important to identify specific activities with specific costs. Add a section that updates the total value of the City’s urban forest. The most recent update to the City’s *Comprehensive Plan* contains very little information about the City’s urban forest and the benefits it provides. A member of the Urban Forestry Commission should become directly involved with the process of updating the City’s *Comprehensive Plan* and ensure that the vision and goals of the Urban Forestry Commission are well represented in the *Comprehensive Plan*. This will raise the visibility of the urban forestry services provided by the City and place more emphasis on the value of planning for the future of urban forestry in University City.

Discussion and citizen comments: Ted presented a letter signed by the Urban Forestry Commission in support of the Forestry Department and the Urban Forestry Operations Review.

Norma made a motion to adjourn the meeting, Nancy second, meeting adjourned at 8: 30 pm

Next meeting date: September 9 at 7:00 pm.

James Crowe