

Notes For Forest Managers

Missouri Department of Conservation



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Urban Forestry in Missouri Communities: Attitudes and Knowledge of Local Officials

To better understand local forestry officials' knowledge, motivation and behavior, a self-administered survey questionnaire was mailed to local forestry officials in 602 Missouri communities who are members of the Missouri Municipal League. The overall response rate for the mailing list was 60 percent, with 364 communities responding from the 602 surveyed.

Our goal was to characterize the local agencies charged with managing urban trees, their budgets and personnel levels, and to determine which urban forestry issues local forestry officials found to be most pressing. This information is useful in targeting the Missouri Department of Conservation's Community Forestry Program. The program is designed to advise, coordinate and facilitate the efforts made by many jurisdictions and entities that own and affect community forests.

Characteristics of a sustainable community

The National Arbor Day Foundation's *Tree City USA* program certifies communities that have met four basic elements of a community forestry program. Those four elements are a good tool to use in assessing a community's forestry program. A sustainable community would have:

1. A tree board or forestry department – someone legally responsible for care of public trees designed by ordinance.
2. A tree care ordinance that determines public tree care policies for planting, maintenance and removals. The ordinance also designates the board or department responsible for writing and implementing an annual community forestry work plan.
3. Annual spending of at least \$2 per capita for tree management.
4. An annual public education program or event.

ABSTRACT

A self-administered survey mailed to local forestry officials in 602 Missouri communities found that most communities budget no dollars for tree care activities. Seventy-five percent of the communities surveyed indicated that they do not have an employee who spends the majority of their time on tree related activities. Most Missouri communities do not have a public tree ordinance, a written community forest management plan, or a comprehensive tree ordinance that addresses tree preservation during development. This points to the need for greater publicity of the value of trees, the value of planning for proper care and the necessity to educate communities.

Characteristics of an average Missouri community

Survey results show that most communities:

- Are reactive in caring for their community forest with the majority budgeting no dollars for tree care activities – well below the \$2 per capita benchmark that the Tree City USA program sets;
- Do not have a full-time person employed to care for that community's trees and are unlikely to have even one person who deals with trees occasionally;
- Do not employ anyone with a degree in forestry, horticulture or a related subject;
- Do not have a public tree ordinance or a written community forest management plan;
- Fund or budget tree activities from general revenue; and
- May locate tree care responsibilities in many different departments including Maintenance, Public Works, and Parks and Recreation.
- Communities with a population under 5,000 and those with a population greater than 150,000 feel the most strongly that their community is not adequately addressing tree care during development;
- Communities with a population under 5,000 seldom participate in community forestry cost-share programs;
- Communities that are willing to budget for tree care activities or have a public

tree ordinance are more likely to participate in state cost-share programs;

- St. Louis suburban communities seem to utilize cost-share programs more than communities in the suburbs of Kansas City.

Most community officials charged with tree care and maintenance:

- Do not feel that they have enough resources to adequately manage and maintain publicly-owned trees;
- Feel that their community does not have enough publicly-owned trees but do not feel that tree planting is very important; and
- Feel that pruning and removing hazard trees is important.

Recommendations

The survey results show that most Missouri communities do not meet the guidelines that The National Arbor Day Foundation requires for *Tree City USA* certification. The survey and analysis leads to the following recommendations:

- Most communities lack basic information on tree planting, pruning, hazard tree identification, etc. A concerted effort should be made to provide training of this nature.
- The responsibility for tree care in a given community could be in any number of departments. It is critical to ask questions to get information to the person or work team who really needs the training and information. The goal

should be to deliver targeted and coordinated assistance.

- Since most communities do not currently hire anyone to work directly with trees and their budget for trees is often zero, it may be necessary to begin work by meeting with the decision makers in a community (i.e. Mayor, City Administrator) to stress the value of the community's tree infrastructure, the importance of personnel and dedicated funding for maintenance trees.
- Information on how to diversify funding and secure more stable sources of income will prove valuable when meeting with community leaders. A community forestry fact sheet that includes advice on these issues could be developed.
- State agencies should form or strengthen partnerships with non-governmental organizations, such as municipal leagues and community betterment councils. These partnerships would facilitate the distribution of information on the value of trees to a community, creative funding mechanisms and tree care techniques.
- Cost-share dollars should continue to be made available to communities to fund community forestry activities, with an emphasis on increasing participation among communities with a population under 5,000.
- Emphasis on pruning and hazard tree removal may be a way to engage non-traditional communities.
- Interest in tree preservation during development is high in most communities. Efforts to provide information on development principles that preserve or

maximize greenspace and conserve watersheds should be enhanced.

1999 Urban Tree Survey

A comparison of data between a 1999 urban tree survey and a similar one done in 1989 shows significant changes in Missouri's community forests. Results show:

- There are more trees on public property but a decline in their condition.
- Missouri's urban forests are becoming more diverse. The top six tree species constitute 37 percent of those surveyed in 1999, as compared to 53 percent found in 1989.
- The average value of a Missouri street tree increased by \$642, using the Council of Tree and Landscape Appraisers' formula.

There has been little or no data that could be used to attribute these changes to community forestry programs, to demographic changes in the communities, to changes in local urban tree management department operations or budgets, or to changes in local officials' attitudes.

Reviewing the public official's attitudes in light of the physical tree data collected in a 1999 urban tree survey shows some interesting challenges:

- Seventy-one percent of respondents thought that their community's trees were in good condition. This contrasts with the 36 percent of public trees that were found in Good to Excellent categories in the 1999 re-inventory.
- Public officials had relatively little interest or concern over topped trees.

This, combined with the fact that only 12 percent of trees surveyed in the 1999 re-inventory of street trees were topped, is encouraging. Topping, which is common on private property, is not a concern for municipalities.

- Most communities (64 %) rate removal of hazardous trees as very important and 52 percent feel that hazardous trees are a problem in their community. The 1999 resurvey found 7.4 percent of trees in a hazardous condition or dead.
- Forty-one percent of respondents indicate they feel their community does not have enough public trees yet there is not a strong interest in tree planting. The 1999 survey of existing conditions indicate that most communities have 33 planting locations available per mile in their community.

For more details see Gartner, Treiman, and Frevert, 2002, *Missouri Urban Forest - A Ten Year Look*. Journal of Arboriculture. Vol. 28(2), pp. 76-83.

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