

Hope is a Tree, Part 4: Your Tree Commission, Appendix

Each town's Tree Commission is created by ordinance to advise elected officials on matters pertaining to the creation and maintenance of its collection of trees—the Urban Forest. The Commission itself has no regulatory authority and must abide by decisions of the legislative body it serves, whether their members agree with those decisions or not.

Nonetheless, Tree Commission members commonly have more power than they realize. Unlike most city employees, they can speak directly to the Mayor and Council members, and through them, influence the public's appreciation of the town's trees and the work of the arborists who care for them.

In fact, it can be argued that public outreach is the main function of a Tree Commission. When Commission members are effective in helping the community understand how a healthy urban forest improves residents' quality of life, and begin to appreciate the professional attention required to manage it, City Council will find it easier to allocate resources to the upkeep of this critical component of the town's "living infrastructure."

But the members of the Commission are volunteers coming from all walks of life, with little or no experience in the area in which they are asked to advise local government. It's a reasonable question to ask why the Mayor and Council Members should pay them any heed?

To address this problem, the Forestry Division of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources developed the Tree Commission Academy (TCA) in 2009. Unique within the nation, the TCA consists of four two-day courses of instruction currently led by long-time Urban Forester, Stephanie Miller.

With over 40 hours of in-class instruction and fieldwork typically spread over the course of a year, the program equips Tree Commission members with a basic understanding of tree biology, planting and maintenance, urban soils, pest issues, tree inventory methods, working with contractors, budgeting, communicating with the public, and the development of a long-range Urban Forest Management Plan for their specific community.

A comment on that last item, the creation of a long-range Management Plan: The typical urban tree can be expected to live 75 years or so, and each year a percentage of those trees will need to be replaced before they become a hazard. Depending on the weather, disease or pest infestations, and other factors, some years will require more replacements than others.

Formerly, the selection and planting of trees was conducted in a haphazard manner, with little thought given to diversity of species or the big picture. So, when Dutch Elm Disease or, more recently, the Emerald Ash Borer hit, whole sections of many cities were stripped of their shade trees.

In an effort to avoid such headaches down the road, ODNR's Urban Foresters have developed the Master Planting Design, essentially a roadmap for a city's future treescape. It's a six-step

process leading from a Tree Commission's development of an Urban Site Index—where each street is evaluated for the types of trees for which it would be best suited—to the creation of a Master Plan for the entire town indicating what types of trees will be planted to replace those needing to be removed when the time comes.

The Master Plan takes into account the importance of developing a diverse, beautiful urban forest consisting of trees appropriate to the conditions, both municipal and environmental, of each part of the city.