MUNICIPAL ARBORIST EXCHANGE PROGRAM

From Oakville, ON, Canada, to Santa Monica, CA
by John McNeil, RPF, Certified Arborist

I met Walt Warriner, Community Forester for the City of Santa Monica, when he spoke at the Town of Oakville's *Urban Forest Strategic Planning Workshop* in June 2004.

I was impressed with Walt's accomplishments in the City of Santa Monica, particularly his plan check review process to mitigate construction damage to trees. When the opportunity arose through the SMA Arborist Exchange program to go to Santa Monica, I jumped at the chance.

My exchange took place January 16-21, 2005. During my visit I observed consulting arborist work in Orange County and operations at the City of Santa Monica's Forestry Section. I also met some of the 180 arborists at the January meeting of Street Tree Seminar, Inc. I enjoyed a full day tour of urban forestry "next door" in the City of Los Angeles with George Gonzalez, Chief Forester. The visit allowed me to contrast the forestry programs of Santa Monica and Los Angeles with my own.

John McNeil oversaw the removal of a hazardous 180-year-old white oak (Quercus alba) in the Town of Oakville, Ontario, Canada. Photo: Author.

COMMONALITIES

Enthusiasm for our work and recognition of our roles as agents of positive change. Both Walt and I put a lot of care into our communities' urban forests. We recognize that to be successful we can't operate in isolation and have to go out of our way to reach out to other departments within our municipal structures.

Plan check review process. Both our programs have in place formal review of tree protection during construction. We are both plugged in to other departments' internal plan review processes. For example, Oakville is currently electronically linking its tree permit process with all other affected departments. We both share the challenge of sometimes having to deal with unprofessional contractors.

The concept of management of the urban forest as part of the municipal infrastructure. The City of Los Angeles has in its general plan recognition that the urban forest is part of that city's infrastructure. The wording in the urban forestry section in our town's official plan is not as emphatic but does include a requirement that adequate space for street trees be provided in new road cross section designs.

DIFFERENCES

The vitality of the local consulting arborist industry. Private arborists are more established and more numerous in Santa Monica, while the Town of Oakville has only six consulting arborists on its list of qualified consultants.

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Walt attributes this in part to the widespread use of the Certified Arborist standard in municipal specifications in the U.S.

Support for urban forestry at the level of federal government. The input into urban forestry by the U.S. federal government through the Center for Urban Forest Research, Pacific Southwest Research Station, the USDA Forest Service and others does not have a counterpart in Canada. The highest level of government support for urban forestry in Canada is at the municipal level, which creates a significant vacuum in technology transfer.

Extent of open space. Santa Monica has a relatively low percentage of forested parkland relative to other forms of land use. Oakville has 700 hectares (about 1,500 acres) of forested parkland, and approximately 20% of Oakville is zoned for open space.

EXCHANGE HIGHLIGHTS

I was impressed with the high standards Santa Monica practices for street tree management, including a two- to four-year pruning cycle for palms (and yes, I found that the fronds from *Phoenix canariensis*, Canary Island date palm, really are sharp, not to mention toxic). Santa Monica's pruning cycle is coordinated with the streets department, among others. Oakville has a three-year pruning cycle in its line clearing contract with Oakville Hydro, but management of the rest of the town's 125,000 street and park trees tends to be more reactive.

I observed a demonstration of 'Tree Radar' technology by Dr. Tony Mucciardi, President of Tree Radar, Inc. Tony conducted a test of his system on a date palm to assess structural decline caused by decay associated with *Fusarium*. He also looked at several tree root profiles with this radar-based instrument. I believe that this technology could become an extremely promising tool for arborists.

Walt, George and I enjoyed contrasting the concepts of "the right tree for the right site" and "the right site for the right tree". I wondered if *Ficus*—a genus not currently represented in *Street Trees Recommended for Southern California* (2nd edition)—might be misunderstood. I saw that widespread planting of ficus some 60 to 70 years ago has led to conflicts between "green infrastructure" (roots) and "gray infrastructure" (sidewalks, curbs, and waterlines). Yet given its long list of arboricultural attributes, including vigorous growth, good shade,

and lack of significant insect pests and diseases, I think it's worth using in specially designated sites.

I also learned more about the application of structural soil to improve tree habitat in commercial zones. Walt showed me a site in a commercial district where the city created an irrigated tree well design—with about nine cubic yards of structural soil volume—that is successfully supporting the growth of *Koelreuteria bipinnata* (Chinese flame tree).

The exchange far surpassed my expectations. Not only did I have glorious weather—more representative of a southern California spring than winter—but the friendships I developed are of immeasurable value to me. Thank you to the SMA and their corporate sponsor, Altec Industries, Inc., for offering the Arborist Exchange program. For me, the exchange was more valuable than any conference I've attended in my 16 years of practicing urban forestry.

Words alone cannot express the appreciation I have for my host, Walt Warriner, as well as for George Gonzalez. They went out of their way to make sure that I had the fullest possible opportunities to maximize my exchange experience. In closing, I can simply say that if the opportunity should arise I would be glad to do the same for them... and, hey "dude", I can dig Southern California!

Vital Statistics: Santa Monica, CA

- *Population: Resident population 95,000 /Daytime population 250,000+*
- *Tree population: 32,600*
- *Full-time park forestry staff: 9*
- *Management plan: Community Forest Management Plan 2000 (adopted by City Council)*
- *Street tree inventory: Yes*
- *Pruning cycles: Species-specific and vary from annual to a 6-year cycle*
- Ten most common trees: *Washingtonia robusta* (Mexican fan palm), *Ficus macrophylla* (Moreton Bay ficus), *Magnolia grandiflora* (Southern magnolia), *Phoenix canariensis* (Canary Island date palm), *Podocarpus gracilior* (Fern pine), *Ceretonia siliqua* (Carob), *Pinus canariensis* (Canary Island pine), *Cupaniopsis anacardioides* (Carrotwood), *Cedrus deodara* (Deodar cedar), *Liquidambar styraciflua* (Sweet gum)
- *Source of pride: The city's 3,300 ficus trees*
- *Biggest challenge: Maintaining the city's 3,300 ficus trees*