

Working Effectively with City-Appointed Tree Boards

Photos Courtesy Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Forestry

The City of Cincinnati, Ohio is led by an elected mayor, nine city council members and a city manager who is appointed by the mayor. The urban forestry program is under the direction of a mayor-appointed, five-member board of park commissioners and the park director. The Cincinnati Urban Forestry Advisory Board (UFAB) is established within the municipal code, and its members are appointed by the city manager. The UFAB is well conceived:

- Two members are community-oriented former tree board chairs within their respective communities. They represent the concerns, well-being, and sensibilities of Cincinnati's 52 unique neighborhoods.
- Two members are from the fields of arboriculture, forestry, horticulture, or landscape architecture. These professionals have the ability to assist with their technical expertise, especially in cases in which an individual or group appeals to the UFAB to remove a healthy tree or rescind an official order to remove a hazard tree.
- Two members are from the business community and provide input on budget, public relations, politics, and policy.
- The director of city planning, city engineer, and director of public works are all permanent members and provide input and insight on infrastructure conflicts, budgets, city project coordination, and general program management.

The Cincinnati municipal code requires the city manager to make UFAB appointments. However, historically he has done so only after a candidate is recommended by the park director and vetted by other staff. We recommend people who are not just tree huggers but who understand the cultural, aesthetic, and environmental application of urban forestry and who are open minded and can work in a team atmosphere.

When it comes to driving the urban forestry bus, it comes down to teamwork, members understanding their roles, politics, and technical details that at times seem to be overwhelming. Legally, the UFAB has only advisory powers. It makes recommendations to the

park director, who is responsible for implementation and management of the program according to the direction of the park board. In reality the UFAB functions primarily in a policy formulation capacity. Its major accomplishments have been development of a 20-year management plan, emerald ash borer response plan, and visionary wood waste plan. These endeavors have been productive and enjoyable because of the quality of the people who serve on the UFAB.

As secretary to the UFAB, it is my job to know the general direction we need to go, make sure there is fuel in the tank, and most importantly, know when to hit the brakes. Often the UFAB members have good intentions but don't understand the political considerations that must be analyzed, planned around, and mapped out in advance to avoid the potholes and detours that can wreck worthwhile plans. The most critical time to develop a road map is during City budget hearings when the program may be competing with other park programs for limited funds. It is important to understand the departmental priorities and work within a framework that benefits the entire department.

Here are my top seven rules for working with tree boards:

1. *Communication* is the key to success within any organization. Be open to new ideas and criticism.
2. *Transparency* is vital. The key to handling public issues is to be straightforward and honest.
3. *Adaptability* is necessary for survival. From biology I learned that it isn't the biggest, fastest, or strongest species that survives, it is the one that is most adaptable.
4. *Diversity* is important. Try to get people with different backgrounds and perspectives on your board. Most urban forestry problems are somewhat complex and one thing that I have found in my 25 years of experience is that there are multiple ways to solve them.
5. *Education* is king. There are many resources available for tree board members. The National Arbor Day Foundation *Handbook for Tree Board Members* is excellent. The



Municipal representatives participate in an Ohio Tree Commission Academy activity.

Ohio Department of Natural Resources has started a Tree Commission Academy for citizen community tree board members. The curriculum is structured like college with a freshman-through-senior lesson plan that covers everything from tree biology to budget development and contracting. State urban forestry programs are another excellent resource. Well informed board members make informed decisions and as subject experts can well represent your program.

6. Don't take yourself too seriously. Keep the meeting upbeat and have fun. I always serve homemade cookies or muffins. It is a small touch that shows a little bit of appreciation for the important work that they do.
7. Thank them often. I always pay to send every UFAB member (who wants to attend) to our annual Tree City USA Awards. It gives them an appreciation for what other communities are doing and the opportunity to pick up the hardware for Cincinnati.

—*Dave Gamstetter, Natural Resource Manager, Cincinnati Park Board, Cincinnati, Ohio*

There is nothing like a small town tree board. In most cases the members of such boards are individuals from all walks of life who volunteer their time to improve their community. It is their love of trees that unites them in a common cause. Having chaired just such a board early in my career, I know firsthand how valuable they can be and the legacy they can leave.

The reason for this effectiveness may have something to do with the fact that in most cases membership on the tree board does not require an extensive expertise in trees or urban forestry. Members can find this expertise from their state urban forestry program, university extension service, or local tree care firm. Tree boards take pride in planting trees where there have not been trees before. They can point to an accomplishment that snowballs into ongoing success stories. Many seek Tree City USA status as a way of developing political support from elected officials.

When given the freedom to get things done they often expand beyond an advisory role. This is because small town administrators such as public works directors or village managers are happy to let their tree board appear front and center with both feel good projects and those that are unpopular. Let's face it, when your fellow citizens help condemn a hazardous tree, it's easier to accept the news than if it's delivered from the government.

The success of small town tree boards is achieved through guidance, not control. The Ohio Department of Natural Resource's Tree Commission Academy is a great example of the kind of education that is the most valuable for board members. Most members know their town so well that they have great ideas for fund raising, publicity, and project development. By minimizing the politics and reducing the obstacles, small town tree boards are almost guaranteed to do great things.

Big city tree boards pose an entirely different challenge. While their members are also appointed by politicians, the political stakes are much higher than in a small town. The success or failings of a big city tree board can have a direct impact on the ladder-climbing aspirations of many aspiring politicians. I have personally served on a tree board composed of the mayor's brother-in-law, a generous political contributor, and a well connected attorney.

The biggest challenge that a city forester faces when working with a big city tree board are the tree experts that often compose its membership. Such individuals have their hearts in the right place but have a hard time understanding why everything cannot be their way. I distinctly recall one tree board member vehemently declaring, "I don't care if you think we plant too many Callery pears, I want to see more Callery pears

planted throughout the city.”

Some in the urban forest community believe that the city forester should be the visionary leader of big city tree boards. While this may be an admirable goal, there are times when it is the furthest thing possible. Tree boards will have their own agendas and the city forester must attempt to accommodate those needs while still following the departmental work plan. If it is not expertly performed, there can be grave consequences. Recently my current tree board felt that diseased trees were not being removed fast enough. Guess who was labeled as incompetent, uncaring, and ineffective? If you think I’m exaggerating let me know and I’ll send you a copy of the four-page manifesto that each tree board member received.

My advice for working with big city tree boards is to keep an open mind. Their suggestions can be so plentiful that it would be easy to disregard all of them. However, every now and then there will be an informational nugget or idea that is worth considering. Acting upon such advice eventually garners the support you and your program will need. It just may take a lot longer than you’d expect or prefer.

—Ralph Sievert, Director of Forestry, Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, Minneapolis, Minnesota

It has been a desire of mine to have a training program for existing and new tree board/commission members in Virginia. To that end, working with the Virginia Urban Forest Council, I had hoped to develop a manual or program leading to a kind of certification for citizen tree commissioners.

We prepared a 26-question survey to send to existing boards, commissions, or committees in Tree City USA cities around the state. The survey attempted to gauge their experiences and what they felt they needed in terms of training. We had a 35% response from the communities we polled. Some of the findings from the survey are interesting.

We asked: *Is the manager of your urban forestry program an ISA certified arborist?* We found a 50-50 split on this question. *Do you have an ordinance relating to urban forestry/tree care?* More than 93% replied that they did. *Who is primarily responsible for your street trees?* The majority of the localities stated that it was their public works department that managed their public trees.

We asked citizens what kind of training they felt they needed to more effectively serve on their community tree board or commission. In the arena of Knowledge, 40% of respondents ranked tree care as number one, followed by 32% for urban forestry management. For



Tiffin, Ohio has had a well guided tree commission for many years.

Skills, 64% ranked advocacy as number one, followed by 46% for street tree inventory. We asked: *How would you prefer to receive training?* Face-to-face training on three consecutive days ranked last; face-to-face one day a month for three months ranked in the middle; and through the Internet ranked highest.

Although we haven’t yet received funding to complete the proposed tree commissioner certification project, the survey did help our state urban forest council recognize the need to train citizens to serve on tree boards.

—Jay Banks, Urban Forester, Leesburg, Virginia

Tale of Two Cities

Tiffin and Bowling Green are small cities in northwest Ohio. Both are university towns and have histories as industrial hubs in that corner of the state. Both have also had functioning tree commissions for 25 or more years, but until 2003 their tree programs had little in common.

Tiffin had a city arborist on staff for nearly a decade, a functioning street tree inventory, and a routine tree planting, pruning, and removal program. Rarely did Tiffin experience any tree failures.

Bowling Green handled things differently; many of the City’s tree decisions were made by its volunteer tree commission, and removals were based primarily on citizen requests to City Hall. These requests proved overwhelming. Although they had an arborist on staff, it was not a formal position, and emphasis was not placed on proactive tree care or routine management. Through a combination of advice from an Ohio Division of Forestry urban forester to create a city forester position, as well as a strong wind storm in 2003, things were about to change for Bowling Green.



Bowling Green, Ohio sustained significant tree and structural damage throughout the city in 2003, catalyzing the hiring of a city arborist and a change in role for the City's tree commission.

The 2003 storm blew through both cities and produced very damaging winds. Both communities experienced tree failures, but the damage sustained by Bowling Green was significantly greater and more noticeable to the public and administration than in Tiffin, which was limited to a few predictable limbs and a couple of root-damaged trees. Bowling Green lost many beloved trees in its park and historic cemetery, sustained quite a bit of structural damage to some buildings, and suffered large, costly damage to street trees. Some tree failures had even been predicted by the state's urban forester, lending further credibility to the notion that most storm damage is predictable ... and preventable.

Bowling Green hired a dedicated city arborist after the 2003 storm. Within two years, Bowling Green had a working inventory, a management plan, and a vision. The tree commission focused on providing an advisory role and educating the public, reviewing plans, and being a voice for the City's community forestry program.

Tiffin and Bowling Green still share some hefty storms, but today they both boast little to no tree damage thanks to the relationship between their professional city arborists and tree commissions.

Empowering the Masses

Margaret Mead said, "A small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." This is the dream of many an urban forester. A dream started with a small gathering of city foresters around the Cleveland area identifying challenges to their programs and how to best address them. Of course, the perennial problem of budget was

identified, but the participants focused on identifying other significant challenges they could impact. The city foresters agreed that elected officials, tree commissions, residents, and municipal employees are generally unfamiliar with the role and responsibilities of their city forester and the professional qualifications necessary to do the job. They recognized that tree commissions, in particular, could actually be adversarial and a hindrance without the training necessary to fulfill their role effectively.

City of Hudson Arborist Tom Munn was part of that discussion. He and the City's tree commission had worked together for years, yet the commission members still lacked a clear understanding of their role as well as the responsibilities and limitations of their city arborist. Munn noted, "Imagine accepting a new position with a city government, with no job description, organizational chart, clear goals and objectives, and little (if any) direction from supervisors. How effective would you be? Also, as a volunteer, are your efforts relevant, important, and appreciated? New volunteers need direction and a sense of accomplishment."

In 2008, the opportunity arose to change this predicament with the Ohio Division of Forestry's new Tree Commission Academy (TCA), a series of classes designed to better equip Ohio's tree commissioners, local decision-makers, and elected officials about how to manage their community forests. Tom Munn was part of a team of urban foresters asked to audit the first round of TCA, and he was joined by Hudson's Tree Commission. The TCA helps bring these "small groups of thoughtful people" together, but one class in particular caught the attention of the Hudson contingency: *Tree Commission & Municipal Relations*.

Discussion developed about the real power of tree commissions. In Ohio, commissions are appointed by the mayor and council. They don't have a boss and can talk directly to their elected officials. Urban forest-



Hudson, Ohio was host to one of the state's first Tree Commission Academy classes. Pictured are all of the graduates including Tom Munn (back row, second from left) and the Hudson Tree Commission.

ers, however, must respect local protocol. Going to the mayor or council is usually not acceptable. It was on Munn's recommendation that the Division of Forestry incorporate a typical municipal flowchart into the TCA curriculum to strengthen the message that tree commissioners indeed play a critical role in educating their elected officials about the needs of a community forestry program. That, coupled with the rest of TCA, has empowered the Hudson Tree Commission to be a tremendous voice for an effective, efficient program and to "change the world." Here is what Munn had to say about their experience.

The Tree Commission Academy taught us the proper role of tree commissioners and how to navigate the system. This is even more important in our tough economic times. Cities are desperate for new development. The temptation to forgo tree protection standards, landscape requirements, wetland setbacks, and green space requirements to cut development costs are big challenges for tree commissioners.

A new tree commissioner may feel intimidated going before city council, the same council that appointed them, to push for tree issues. Self-doubt and lack of direction may deter even the most experienced tree commissioner from addressing city council.

The class, *Tree Commission and Municipal Relations*, defined a clear role for our tree commissioners. A valuable benefit is that, when necessary, the tree commission offers a strong voice of support—or dissent—at city council meetings as an advisory team appointed by city council.

Tree Commission Academy emboldens volunteers to work for their urban forestry program as a team of informed, reasonable volunteers and transforms the view of tree commissioners as tree huggers to politically active and savvy proponents. Five or six proponents before council on cable TV sway opinions and votes, and eventually policy and budget. Face time with council drives public policy.

Every city has scarce resources. Municipal arborists need a dedicated team as a tree commission. Tree Commission Academy helps to train new members and empowers veteran members to speak up at budget time, revise ordinances, and form the future of an urban forestry program.

Moving Ahead

Piqua, Ohio is a medium-sized city without a dedicated urban forester position, but it is too big for a volunteer tree commission to manage the tree program. Piqua's tree committee was often limited to one annual meeting simply to review citizen tree complaints—an overwhelming job.

Many Ohio cities have trouble finding a solution for this problem, but Piqua is lucky to have Bob Graeser on staff. Although Graeser wears other hats, he now acts as the urban forester and works with the City's

six-member tree committee. This relationship between the urban forester and tree committee is an effective partnership for the needs of Piqua. The tree committee now meets regularly and is doing much more than answering complaints, thanks to Graeser's efforts.

With Piqua's limited resources, most of Graeser's time and energy are focused on the pruning and removal of their maturing tree population. Although this is good management and fiscally responsible, as time passes with little to no tree planting, the once beautiful canopy cover is being diminished.

For the past couple of years, a local entrepreneur has given Piqua a generous donation to plant street trees throughout the city. Graeser brought the tree committee to the table to be active in many of the large volunteer tree planting events. The tree committee plays a significant role in the administration of these donated funds by organizing and developing the planting activities. The City does much of the nuts and bolts of the tree planting like getting bids and coordinating with local utilities, but the tree committee acts as the liaison with residents and business owners, helping them understand the benefits of having trees along their streets. They are also a visible presence at the planting events, while recruiting others to help as well.

In this tough economic climate, Piqua is doing a great job supporting its tree committee; in return, residents offer grassroots support for the tree program. Graeser proactively leads the tree committee, which thrives by having a direction and purpose. It takes more time and energy to go through a tree committee and build support and consensus for ideas and projects, but Piqua is benefiting from more than just newly planted trees. The City is building community through its urban forestry program. Since success begets success, the tree committee is eager to be more involved with the City's tree program and this year will be making an inventory of all the park trees.

—Wendi Van Buren & Stephanie Miller, *Urban Foresters, Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Forestry*

The City of Surrey, like most Canadian cities, has not implemented a tree board. Rather, our parks, recreation, and culture department has adopted a business practice whereby we "accomplish our mission through active partnerships and a community development approach." This means that staff actively engages the public so that our service delivery is reflective of the community's values.

With respect to urban forest service delivery, staff works closely with two local urban forest advisory committees, each of which is associated with one of two large urban forest parks that have critical environmental, historical, and cultural significance to the com-

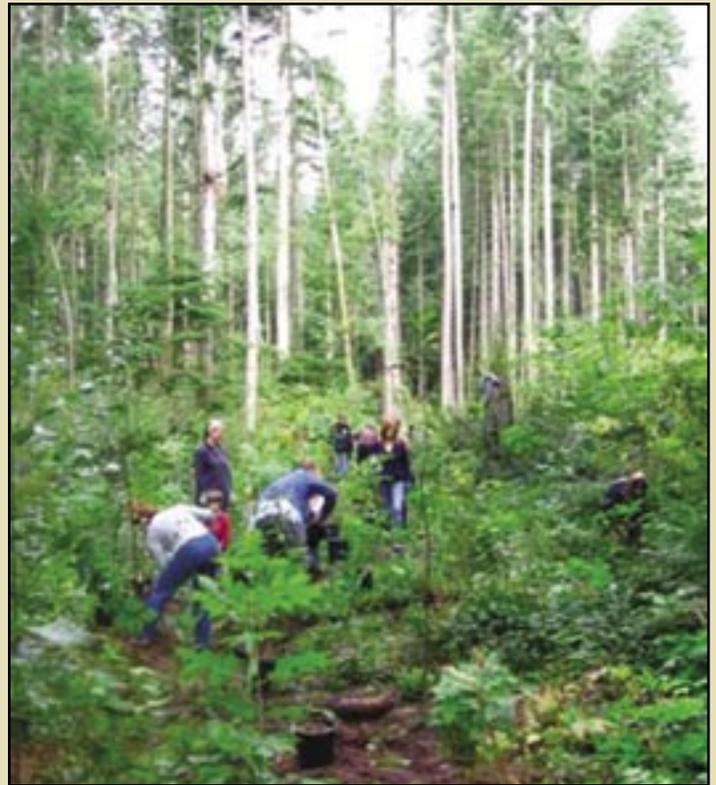


Douglas fir logs are stacked for removal after clearing takes place in Sunnyside Acres Urban Forest in Surrey, British Columbia. There was no public protest because the public was so well represented by members of Surrey's advisory committees.

munity. The mandate of the advisory committees is to advise the City on the management of these special forested parks. Interpretation of what is permissible and in the best interest of the urban forest and the community, in terms of development, stewardship, maintenance, and programming, is highly variable within a community such as Surrey due to the wide array of demographic, socio-economic and cultural issues inherent in our city. The committees greatly assist in working within this diversity; they provide advice to City staff to ensure that the urban forests are carefully managed for their intrinsic and heritage values.

The advisory committees are composed of representatives from conservation societies, professionals in the green industry such as biologists, and, very importantly, members of the general public, younger and older. There is sometimes a tendency for the committee members to want to be involved in the day-to-day operations, providing technical advice on the management of trees and forests. One of the challenges in working with these committees is to keep members on track and focused on the broader, value-based issues that have long-term consequences to the functioning of the forest.

Recently, laminated root rot (*Phellinus weirii*) threatened to slowly decimate the Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) and grand fir (*Abies grandis*) in one of the two large urban forests, Sunnyside Acres Urban Forest. This natural forest is classified as a rare and endangered ecosystem in the Province of British Columbia. After two years of numerous consultant reports, media reports, public meetings and thorough review by the Sunnyside Acres advisory committee, it was decided that dramatic intervention was needed to control the spread of the disease. This entailed the contracting of a logging company with fallers, skidders, and logging trucks to operate within this forest in the middle



Volunteers replant Sunnyside Acres Urban Forest in Surrey, British Columbia after disease mitigation work.

of perhaps the most “green-sensitive” area of Surrey. Hundreds of trees were removed with nary a call from the public and no political backlash. A critical part to the success of this operation was the thorough review of the issue by the advisory committee, its unconditional support, and the support of the conservation societies that are represented on the committee. Rather than the management intervention being perceived as a suspect decision by an uncaring government bureaucracy, it was regarded as community based and legitimate.

The most critical strategic elements to success in working with our advisory committees are mutually respectful relationships, careful listening, and the recognition that a diversity of viewpoints is expected and healthy. This respect takes considerable time to develop and cannot occur solely through committee meetings. Trust and respect, not just intellectual capacity and critical analysis, is paramount in the successful resolution of complex issues, since the resolution is often not about data interpretation but about one's values. Therefore, in order to succeed with our committees, how we conduct meetings, how and how often we communicate outside of the regular meetings, how we listen to various views and express our own, and how well we really know each other are goals in themselves.

—Greg Ward, Manager, Urban Forestry and Environmental Programs, City of Surrey, British Columbia 🍃