

Roundtable:

## Urban Forestry's Location in City Departments

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### *Is it best for city forestry programs to be housed in Public Works?*

*Planning and Zoning? Parks and Recreation? SMA members weigh in.*

I am positioned under Planning and Zoning. Although I admit that we are a very small city with a small administration and things are simpler here, I am able to integrate conditions into development agreements through the planners. This department is amazing, we all have a great rapport, and my position meshes nicely with the planners. We back each other up and are more effective as a result. I am sure that the position I am in is unique and successful because of the small size of the community, but I can see how powerful a city forester working through P&Z can be when integrated into the plans early on. We contract out our tree work and engineering, so I don't have a need to be placed within Public Works. Maybe the effectiveness and efficiency is part structure and part relationship ... I'm not sure. But here, for now, working in P&Z seems to be the best place I could be.

—Julie Lafferty, City Forester, Eagle, Idaho

In Fort Worth, the Forestry Section is in the Parks and Community Services Department and has been since its inception in 1924. It works well because of a city code giving our department jurisdiction over all vegetation in parkways and medians and around municipal buildings and other City property. We have the authority to deal with other departments concerning protection or removal of City trees during construction. We also have the opportunity to review landscape plans for all municipal buildings, since we will be maintaining that landscape. Despite the code, a constant effort is required to keep the lines of communications open with Engineering as well as with Transportation and Public Works. As employees come and go, new relationships must be formed. No opportunity can be missed to create an awareness of the value of trees and what is needed to protect them during construction.

The advantage of working from outside these departments is that higher positions within those departments cannot have undue influence over our decisions and recommendations. The disadvantage is a universal one. Parks departments are historically underfunded—

and we are only one section grabbing for our very small piece of a very small pie.

—Melinda Adams, City Forester, Fort Worth, Texas

In Los Angeles we actually have a Forestry Section in Parks and one in Public Works, which is where I work. Unfortunately, neither division is very well funded, but I have funding and staffing ten times the size of our Parks Department.

While it's true that Public Works is predominantly staffed by engineers, they also have the mindset of infrastructure managers. For years trees were not viewed as infrastructure elements, but we fought very hard to get trees listed as such in our General Plan framework. Also, our Board of Public Works, which wields a lot of power in this city, serves as tree advocates. I can't tell you that it's been easy or that everybody in PW understands the value of trees, but there has been a huge cultural change and now, street trees are truly treated as vital infrastructure elements. And while streets will always be the "big dog on the porch" in PW, trees are not that far behind anymore.

My boss starts every community meeting with the statement, "I take care of the three infrastructure elements that impact you the most when you step out of your house: streets, trees, and sidewalks." Being in a department where I work with the folks that take care of the streets and sidewalks gives me a big advantage because if one of those crews fails to contact us and coordinate with us before they do work that impacts trees, they'll find themselves in their boss's office explaining what went wrong.

If you do move to PW, you may have to do some work to change the culture there if, historically, trees were not viewed with the same value as other infrastructure elements. But my experience is that once they understand their role in maintaining and preserving the health of the urban forest, they fall in line very quickly. And it's a lot of fun turning engineers into tree advocates!

—George Gonzalez, Chief Forester, Los Angeles, California

**W**hen I was Superintendent of Parks for the City of Rancho Palos Verdes, street & park tree management was under the jurisdiction of the Public Works Department. My immediate supervisor was the Director of PW. It worked well inasmuch that I had plenty of field support (from the PW crews) during storm conditions and there was a lot of budget flexibility for trimming, tree replacement, etc. It was also nice to have the engineering support right in the same department when we were designing or implementing park improvement projects. However, like anything else, it's all about the working relationships you develop with co-workers—if you work well with people, it doesn't matter where your section is located.

—*Walt Warriner, Community Forester, City of Santa Monica, California*

**W**hile the opportunity to change the engineers' and policy makers' mindsets has been a rewarding aspect of being located within Public Works, I think that the primary factor over the span of my career has been the attitudes of the successive administrations I have worked under. I am currently serving my 5th mayor and, frankly, the support I now enjoy has never existed prior to this current administration.

Whether one's program is located within Public Works, Parks and Recreation, or, as mine once was, a separate, cabinet-level department, you can only do so much without the budgetary support and the attitudes that allow you to actually accomplish the things you seek from your program. Regardless of where you exist “on paper,” the real proof is found in the resources and respect you are afforded by other departments and agencies, as well as those afforded within your own agency.

Of course, being around long enough to eventually win over those who formerly viewed trees as inconsequential niceties takes stamina, a thick skin, and a great deal of educated professionalism. Once you are viewed as a competent, passionate, and well-informed peer, many doors begin to open.

I work within DPW but I interact regularly with Planning & Zoning, Parks & Recreation, Emergency Management, and numerous other local agencies. In many ways, the interactions have been mutually beneficial; all those folks have a lot to learn, but they also have a lot to teach and share.

Where your program is located is less important than how it functions and whether or not it is viewed by others as a valuable resource.

—*Steve Shurtz, Urban Forestry & Landscape Manager, Department of Public Works, Baton Rouge, Louisiana*



City foresters differ on where their department is best housed, but dedication to good communication and urban forest health is universal. Photo by Michelle Buckstrup

I don't really know if Urban Forestry is best served in Parks and Recreation or Public Works, but I can say, based on my experience over the last ten years, UF doesn't belong in Planning and Zoning.

Although you would think being involved at the front end is ideal, it really hasn't been so for me. I have been relegated to being a plan reviewer and with all of the plan activities in this burgeoning community, at least one plan per week is due. And it entails not just the review but all of the follow-up meetings associated with each project plus night meetings for some applications. These include site/development plans, re-zonings and special exceptions. Also, my time is used as a zoning inspector for landscaping. So, 70 percent of my time is not truly used as an urban forester but as a plan reviewer and zoning inspector.

In this community I feel there would be more funding in Public Works that would better support UF. On the ground, UF is not fully understood in my Planning Department, and trying to move UF programs and projects ahead of Planning's projects really is a big hurdle. Public Works at least deals with tree issues—and I think is a better fit for UF in this jurisdiction.

*—Jay Banks, Urban Forester, Town of Leesburg, Virginia*

As a small city practitioner, I've seen it work well both ways. The comments made about the benefits of being in Public Works are all valid. However, as a Parks and Recreation employee, I enjoy knowing I can argue department to department with PW when we disagree instead of simply following PW mandates. That has come in handy at times. And even though people come and go, the people involved make a big difference. When our program was created 20 years ago, it was P&R that spearheaded the urban forestry initiative. DPW did not have it on their radar, so we ended up in P&R as a result, and we have no regrets. Regardless, the Director of PW invites me to his weekly staff meetings, so we work very well together with the various divisions in PW, as well as with the planning staff in our Development department. Since we do lots of park work and all the street tree work, we're in a unique position either way. In most cases, only large cities can run duplicate forestry programs and staffs, so park tree work is separated from street tree work. Forestry programs must be bridge-builders and boundary-crossers by nature. I also love having the authority to fire employees who hit my park trees with mowers, which I would lack if I was in PW!

*—Steve Cothrel, Superintendent of Parks and Forestry, Upper Arlington, Ohio* 