

Cities Turn Public Tree Care Over to Residents

By Suzanne Hurt

Some cash-strapped California cities have turned street tree maintenance over to residents.

It's a sign of the severe economic times, as a few cities with continuing revenue shortfalls are requiring property owners to care for trees growing along city streets. Yet no one from homeowners and tree advocates to city arborists and state urban foresters seems to think privatizing street tree care is a good idea.

San Francisco is one of the latest cities to notify property owners of changes to public tree maintenance programs.

"It's the wrong direction to go. But it's the essential way to go right now," said Doug Wildman, Program Director with Friends of the Urban Forest in San Francisco. "The city cannot care for the trees they have under their belts right now and they know it."

San Jose, Manhattan Beach, and Santa Rosa also require homeowners and business owners to care for trees in the public right-of-way next to their property. Other cities are exploring the idea.

SEVERE CUTS TO GENERAL FUNDS COST TREES

The reason seems to be the same from city to city. Municipal tree care services have historically been paid for with money from cities' general funds. The general fund is often the first place officials make cuts when struggling with how to balance a city budget with shrinking revenues.

In San Francisco, budget cuts have pushed tree pruning schedules to every 10 to 12 years, rather than the optimum three to five years. San Jose property owners have

been responsible for street tree care since 1951. But the city was able to prune trees every 10 to 15 years until 2008, when the tree crew got axed after continued budget shortfalls, said City Arborist Ralph Mize, adding that the city now has an estimated 243,450 street trees.

San Francisco began a seven-year process to turn over responsibility for 23,700 street trees to private property owners in January. The city plans to continue maintaining 11,600 median and street trees. Private maintenance has always been required for two-thirds of the city's estimated 105,000 street trees.

But many property owners don't know they're responsible for the trees and maintenance isn't done. Others may not hire certified arborists or prune trees to established standards, said city Urban Forester Carla Short.

THE REAL COST OF TURNING OVER TREE CARE

"Even well-intentioned property owners can inadvertently damage a tree because they hire the wrong person. A lot of people don't realize tree care is a specialized science," she said.

Our City Forest President Rhonda Berry says the same is true in San Jose. "The trees here are just hurting. There's a lot of uninformed hacking away at trees being done by gardeners that don't have the proper training. A lot of it is because of a lack of information. It's not that they want to ruin their trees."



Above: The City of San Francisco uses signs plastic wrapped to trees to remind property owners that tree maintenance has been transferred to them.

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This includes:

2012 FARM BILL – This effort stalled last year and is currently in limbo. The Alliance for Community Trees (ACT) partnered with the Sustainable Urban Forests Coalition (SUFC) in 2011 to prepare recommendations for urban forestry within the appropriate section of the 2012 Farm Bill that urge the USDA to prioritize funding to conservation, urban forestry, land protection, watershed health, and green infrastructure programs built on comprehensive, landscape level plans. Click here to download the SUFC Executive Summary and Recommendations.

THE URBAN REVITALIZATION AND LIVABLE COMMUNITIES

ACT – HR 709 is a reboot of earlier legislation (known as UPARR) that would rehabilitate and improve urban parks and recreational infrastructure if passed by Congress and signed by the President. The objective is to revitalize communities with the added benefits of urban greening and recreation spaces. Though the measure has generated significant support, it has stalled in the House Subcommittee on Insurance, Housing and Community Opportunity.

THE FEDERAL TRANSPORTATION ENHANCEMENTS (TE)

PROGRAM – TE is the largest Federal funding source for walking and bicycling trails, and also provides significant resources for landscaping, urban forestry and environmental mitigation. In 2011, there were efforts made in the U.S. Senate to introduce an amendment to eliminate the dedicated funds set aside for the Transportation Enhancements (TE) program. Though the amendment was defeated, there is concern this will likely resurface in 2012 as Congress considers a long-term federal transportation bill.

Chuck Mills is the Grants Program Manager at California ReLeaf.

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State Urban Forester John Melvin said turning tree care over to property owners won't save cities money in the long run. Homeowners won't pay for tree care; they'll remove trees or neglect them. The community will lose environmental benefits provided by trees, maintenance costs will rise and the city will be at risk for lawsuits from falling trees and branches, he said.

“The city has an interest in those trees being healthy,” he said.

Rose Epperson, executive director of the Western Chapter of the International Society of Arboriculture, said the practice isn't in urban forests' best interest.

“The urban forest relies on [consistent] care. To start down one path, and then have the maintenance practices drastically changed, could possibly change the longevity and the efficiency of the urban forests,” she said.

A TEMPORARY FIX

Privatizing street tree care appears to be a temporary fix as cities search for better long-term solutions. San Jose and San Francisco, along with community-based tree advocate groups and other partners, are exploring funding mechanisms such as landscape assessment districts or other special assessments that could establish dedicated funding for municipal tree maintenance.

The trick will be to convince property owners to get on board.

“I think a big part of it is having a sort of wake-up call to the public about the importance of trees, and the necessity to find an avenue to fund our urban forests,” Wildman said.

Suzanne Hurt is a Sacramento journalist whose work can be found via Wild Journalism at www.wildjournalism.com.