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Public Street Trees – A Choice

What is happening to Newton's street trees?

In the early 1970's there were approximately 40,000 trees lining the streets of Newton. Today, that number is about 26,000—a 35% loss. The current annual rate of decline is about 650 trees per year.¹ At this rate, if unchecked, public street trees would diminish to approximately 10,000 within a generation (25 years), and in 40 years, public street trees would no longer be part of the Newton landscape. Clearly, that is a situation that no one wants, so we need to analyze why it is happening and what we can do to stop and reverse this trend.

Why haven't these tree losses been obvious to everyone? We're all subject to a phenomenon called "creeping normalcy," the process by which "a major change can be accepted as the normal situation if it happens slowly, in unnoticed increments, when it would be regarded as objectionable if it took place in a single step or short period."² That makes sense. Anyone announcing that they planned to cut down 14,000 of the city's street trees at one time would be subjected to a firestorm of protest, probably run out of town.

Why is it happening?

The current *Annual Rate of Decline* in street trees is due, for the most part, to age. Many of the city's street trees (predominantly Norway Maple with some Sugar Maple, Red Maple, and White Oak) were planted at about the same time some decades ago and, therefore, are reaching the end of their anticipated lifespan at about the same time. The other contributing



Unpruned street trees: unhealthy and healthy.

Photos: Julia Malakie

factors are structural instability due to the absence of pruning, followed by storm damage, vandalism, road salt, and gas leaks.

The reason for the *Total Decline* of 14,000 trees over the last 40+ years is more straightforward: inadequate funding for tree maintenance and the purchase and planting of replacement trees.

In the recent past, funding has effectively dropped to zero. In the last 10 years, no city funds have been appropriated for planting replacement trees. In addition, on an average annual basis, more funds are expended to remove dead trees than to promote the health and longevity of living trees. That imbalance has been necessary for public safety; funding has not been sufficient to do both adequately.

What is the value of trees?

In addition to their aesthetic and environmental values, trees have a considerable monetary value. For municipal budgeting and other public purposes, trees can be considered a capital asset and assigned an appraised value. In purely financial terms then, the 14,000 street trees Newton has lost in the last 40+ years had a value of \$47,600,000.³ The Newton aldermen now are considering whether to list trees as a capital asset. If they do so, the city could bond work to preserve the urban forest just as it bonds repairs on its aging buildings.

Comparative Data

Are public street trees a subject of concern to other cities and towns in Massachusetts? It seems they are. The cities of Somerville and Arlington recognize the contributions of

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street trees and the tree canopy to their communities in their planning documents. (Newton's Open Space Plan currently is being revised, and similar language may be added.)

The most important comparative question, however, is whether other cities in Massachusetts have tree budgets that are as inadequate as Newton's. Fortunately, the city's arborist, Marc Welch, has collected public data as well as information gathered from his counterparts in other cities and towns that provide a basis for meaningful comparisons.

Boston, Springfield, and Quincy are suitable cities for comparison. All three have relatively comparable populations of street trees; they have relatively comparable per-pupil educational expenditures⁴; and they have not passed a Prop 2.5 override over the last 10 years. The comparison, as shown in the table below, is surprising.

What the data show is that comparable cities have been spending more to maintain their tree assets while spending comparably, or reasonably so, on education, while dealing with

the same 2.5% cap on revenue and while subject to the same overall increases in costs. They have not been slighting the important function of education or taxing their citizens more than Newton. Ironically, the only city among the four that has passed an override in the last 10 years is Newton.

Boston, with the same per pupil expenditure but a larger number of street trees, spends 4 times as much per tree as Newton; Springfield 3.5 times as much; and Quincy 55% more per tree. The other cities have Forestry personnel and equipment. Newton does not.

What can be done?

What the comparison clearly shows is that maintaining and replacing street trees is not inconsistent with living within municipal resources when there is a commitment to do so. It is a choice.

What can you do to help change this choice? You can let your aldermen and city officials know that you value Newton's street trees and want the budget to include sufficient funds to care for them properly and to replace them when necessary.

Cities with Comparable Tree Populations

City	Population	Number of Trees	Spending per Tree	Overrides in Last 10 Years	Expenditure Per Pupil (a)	No. of Tree Workers	Pieces of Equipment	Contracted Services
Boston	588,957	35,000	\$50.99	None	\$16,666	5	5	\$1,100,000
Springfield	152,082	27,000	\$45.00	None	\$13,605	5	4	\$750,000
Quincy	88,025	20,000	\$19.50	None	\$13,942	3	3	\$100,000
Newton	83,829	26,000	\$12.57	Yes (b)	\$16,597	0	0	\$320,000

(a) 2009-10 Per Pupil Expenditures - Mass Dept of Elementary and Secondary Education [http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/ppx.aspx]

(b) 2002 - Schools and General Government - \$11.5 Million

1 Figures provided by Marc Welch, Arborist, City of Newton Forestry Division.

2 Wikipedia

3 Based on the Landscape Appraisal Method, recognized by the court system and insurance industry for calculating the value of trees. Marc Welch.

4 Accounts for about half of city and town budgets in the state. Mass Dept. of Revenue, Division of Local Services.

✎ John DiMiceli, Newton Tree Conservancy

President's Message

Truly mixed feelings come as the winter of 2011-12 draws to a close. It is late February, and we have had stunningly mild weather for months, with little snow. For those of us who would rather be outdoors than anywhere else, this has been almost pure joy. Unfortunately it's hard to deny the sinking feeling that a bad hangover likely follows the short-term guilty pleasure of this New England winter that never came. Record storms, more winters like 2010-11 and global disturbances as a result of the climate change are the possible flip side of this great weather. So what do we do?

Our work as Newton Conservators to preserve our open space is one important thing, allowing us to play a role in mitigating climate change by protecting trees and plants

and by flood control, among other strategies. Please join us in our efforts this spring.

On Newton Serves Day, April 29, we will be leading a number of groups at various sites to remove invasive plants to improve the habitat in our parks. Also, as a member of Newton's Open Space Advisory Committee, we need your help in updating the Open Space Plan, which is essential to acquiring more open space in years to come. Please respond to the City of Newton Recreation and Open Space Survey, and come to the public meeting March 21st. Details can be found on our website, www.newtonconservators.org.

Happy spring to all, and I hope to see you in April.

✎ Jane Sender, President