



**NEWTON
CONSERVATORS**

AUTUMN ISSUE

NEWSLETTER

Newton's land trust working to preserve open space since 1961


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2010-2011**

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Trees and Wires: Bad Mix

 A tree pruning crew from Nstar, one of the utilities that own the telephone and electric wires in our streets, came to Auburndale in early August to clear branches. Neighbors protested the extent of the tree cutting. Newton Conservators' Board Member AnnaMaria Abernathy produced a document from City officials that stopped the work. "Nowhere has there been anything like this before," said Abernathy. "It's fast and cheap, and it does a job on the trees." In some cases, tree canopies were reduced by half. Neighbors' protests were successful in bringing a temporary halt to the pruning. Newton's local newspaper covered the skirmish. Newton Conservator President Jane Sender sent an open letter calling for more minimal pruning. Katherine Howard of the Conservators' Board and Chair of the Newton Urban Tree Commission sent a second open letter. Both are reprinted in this issue.

This small skirmish may be part of a growing clash, due to a simple fact: trees and wires have difficulty occupying the same space. Trees are an important part of the urban forest in a city like Newton, which has relatively little open space. Says Howard, "Trees provide shade and beauty. We enjoy their green, cool shade." The wires provide the power and the communications for the city's businesses and homes. Both are important. And they fight for the same air space.

Before the Wires - Before telephone poles, trees had the canopy to themselves. The major roads of Newton were lined with elms and chestnuts that over-arched the street, the way the big oaks do today on the Route 1 parkway in West Roxbury. When telephone and electricity came along, the



nation wanted to "electrify." In dense urban neighborhoods, along the scenic parkways that were developed in the 1930s, and in commercial centers like Newton's villages, the wires were buried, or "undergrounded." Elsewhere, for a nation spread out over a big landscape, it made more sense to pursue a low-cost approach like overhead wires. We allowed the utilities to install the poles and wires that dominate our streets, originally with one single strand for telephone and one for electricity.

Then came the cable revolution. Utilities used the same small poles to carry heavier cable lines. Two strands multiplied into a dozen, some of them inches thick. Poles bent under the weight. Instead of replacing poles, the utilities "sistered" new, taller poles up to the old poles and carved large swaths

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through the old tree canopy. An array of bent and staggering poles now carries wires through mangled trees. That, as well as our monthly bills, is the cost for the Internet and for the much-improved pictures for our tvs.

With all that, still, storms blow in. Falling trees take down wires, and neighborhoods lose power for days.

Solutions - In 2005, Newton established the Newton Task Force on Undergrounding Utilities to study the possibility of burying the wires. Undergrounding is an optimum solution, as it eliminates the possibility of downed wires. However, undergrounding is expensive. The utilities claim a cost of \$1 million per mile, or \$190 per running foot. (For reference, the cost of a new road, with paving and utilities, is quoted by local road builders at about \$400 per running foot.) To underground any significant portion of the road network would cut into the profits of the utilities. To date, lawmakers and regulators have been unwilling to do that.

Another avenue is to require more minimal pruning. Utilities in other communities prune a much narrower margin around their wires, leaving the trees in healthier condition. This is the request the Conservators have made in President Sender's open letter.

A third is to ask that the utilities be made subject to the Newton Tree Ordinance. The Ordinance, passed in 1999, calls for replacement of trees that are removed. The utilities' heavy pruning, which eventually results in the death of many street trees, may be considered, in effect, a removal of trees. For the utilities, compliance with the Ordinance would be a relatively low-cost solution. Removal of the trees that have the misfortune to be located beneath the wires and planting of replacements at more practical locations would remove the threat to the wires and give the city back its trees.

The solution may be a combination of these efforts. Undergrounding may be the best solution on main roads like Walnut Street, Route 9, and Washington Street, where trees that take out main trunk lines in a storm can knock out power to large parts of the community. Minimal pruning and tree replacement under the Tree Ordinance may be better solutions on side streets.

Cities and towns have no funding for expensive initiatives like burying wires underground. The utilities are for-profit companies. To date, they have been successful in preventing the imposition of costs for undergrounding, tree replacement, or other measures that would reduce their profits. Regulations are on the books that prohibit the kind of

low-cost construction that produces double poles and poles that list at an angle. But the fines for these practices are so light that cities and towns in effect are powerless to put the practices to a stop. To date, the power has belonged to the power company.

But the Conservators have raised an issue. If the Conservators are successful, it may result in a new balance in the conflict between the wires and the trees.

→ Eric Reenstierna



Letters

Use "More Thought and Care"

(This open letter was sent to The Newton Tab.)

To the Editors:

As many people know, contractors for NStar began pruning trees to clear power lines August 7. We are very grateful to City of Newton Tree Warden Marc Welch and Parks & Recreation Commissioner Bob DeRubeis for moving very quickly to stop the pruning once it was clear that branches were being removed in excess of the guidelines previously established.

Although Marc Welch and the Tree Conservancy work extremely hard to plant and maintain the City's trees, Newton loses far more trees every year than can be replaced.

We ask that NStar, as it resumes its work, remember this, and

- (1) prune carefully, only as much as necessary, and
- (2) provide written notice in each neighborhood, of the work and the guidelines being followed.

We are aware that power outages and other issues which come up when branches are too close to electrical lines are costly and disruptive; however, more thought and care needs to be put into the process of cutting branches to ensure that the goal of minimizing disruption is balanced against the need for Newton to maintain a healthy urban forest.

*Jane E. Sender
President
Newton Conservators, Inc*

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Spare the Trees!

(This open letter was sent to *The Newton Tab*. Katherine Howard is a Director and Treasurer of *The Newton Conservators*.)

The recent NSTAR tree pruning in Auburndale was shocking and calls for an improved process. Surrounding communities are dealing with the same issues, which are quite complex:

- Ever-increasing demand for cable, phone, and electricity means more and bigger wires, and need for line clearance. The electric utility has special powers to prune for public safety.
- More, bigger, heavier wires require /taller utility poles – and pruning 12 feet higher.
- The 2' 9" diameter circle around the high power lines is electrified and branches are a fire and safety hazard.
- NSTAR's "standard" is to clear 12 feet above, 8 feet each side, and 8 feet below the electric lines. A branch growing into this zone may be removed to the trunk (for a proper arborist cut). The huge size of this empty zone, reducing NSTAR's costs by extending the pruning cycle, seems excessive (arboriculture standards don't remove more than 25% of a tree's canopy).
- The "right tree for the right spot" principle was not followed in the past, adding to this problem. Newton loses 400-500 public trees per year, and has very limited funds to plant replacements, far less than our surrounding communities. We need to plant large shade trees where we can, and small trees where there are overhead wires. To plant any trees at all, we need public and private support.
- Newton's trees add to the city's property values, beauty, and health of its residents. This priceless asset must be promoted and passed along to future generations. NSTAR must not decimate our urban forest.

The Tree Commission will assist the City's Forestry Department to improve the process, review power outage data, pruning guidelines, notification processes for City and private trees, and standards for the work itself to ensure that good pruning decisions are made.

Katherine Howard
Chair, Newton Urban Tree Commission

President's Message: The Next Fifty Years

50 The Newton Conservators turn fifty in 2011. Like all baby boomers, we seek at midlife a reinvigorated, practical and realistic sense of how we can best use the years of accumulated wisdom, experience, and accomplishments to do even better, furthering our mission of preserving and protecting Newton's open spaces.

My view is that Newton's parks and conservation areas need our stewardship. Paying close attention to what is happening in our open spaces, educating people about them, and working with partners to solve problems is vitally important. My view also is that we need a renewed focus on protecting some of the land listed on the City's open space plan and on shaping current development projects.

We are active in stewardship and in education and awareness efforts. Among our recent efforts are these:

- working with Marc Welch, the City's Tree Warden, we succeeded in temporarily halting NStar's tree pruning so that a more thoughtful approach could be adopted;
- we spearheaded the establishment of a Parks & Recreation Commission Working Group to carefully study current uses and proposed changes at Nahanton Park;
- we are revising our very popular trail guide, providing up to date maps and information;
- we are implementing the recommendations contained in the monitoring reports done by the Massachusetts Audubon Extension Service to keep our properties well managed;
- we are producing a Public Service announcement with NewTV;
- we printed a Second Edition of our highly acclaimed Newton Conservators' Almanac;
- we are updating and creating other communications, including a new promotional card, an updated look for our newsletters, and a new brochure;
- we continue our popular fall and spring walks and events;
- we continue our invasives removal efforts.

These are really solid efforts, and we can build on them in years to come. There is, however, more to be done to focus our efforts on protecting land and on monitoring development projects. We are already planning a new and different Annual Meeting for next year, focusing on our leadership role in preserving additional open space,