

Urban Tree Commission 1.19.2024

Attendance: Howard Birnbaum, Ruth Goldman, Julia Malakie, Amy Sangiolo, Elizabeth Sockwell, Marc Welch, Beth Wilkinson, and Julie Winsett

Guests: Melissa Brown

Approved: Minutes from December

Update:

Busy with storm clean-up. From a storm, they amass a lot of debris and use the next several weeks moving the material to where they dispose of it in Western MA. Then, get back to on-going park work. Depends on weather. In Western MA, gets ground up for mulch but primarily chipped for wood fired power plants. There is a lively wood market. Concern about biomass plants and the amount of carbon released. Consult with sustainable emissions commission to find better ways of disposing of carbon waste.

Melissa will send updates on forest removal for biomass plants in the Northeast, primarily in VT and ME.

Update on Tree Ordinance:

Marc has not done any work since the last meeting. Howard asked if the ordinance affected non-profit property owners as he noticed a large beech that had been taken down recently at Laselle. Marc said they have a very good arborist and they get permits all the time. Marc will check on the status of the this tree. Marc just checked and the tree was in terrible shape with about 80% of the canopy dying/dead. Howard: at what point is a tree ready to be taken down? Marc responded that it's not just about canopy but about structural integrity. They have an arborist complete a risk assessment (a standard ASA? 2 page form) that is, in Marc's opinion overly specific and detailed. It looks at tree integrity and proximity to buildings, and other important infrastructure (a "target"). This tree was adjacent to buildings and to some electrical poles. If it had been in the forest, there would have been no reason to take it down. Howard: it's good to know that there is such a good risk assessment. There is no "numeric" assessment but it's based on "low, moderate, high, extreme" risk. This is a national standard, now but is a more recent system. This was instituted in 2017. Tree wardens follow NC Standard. There is are now nine standards which will be consolidated into one standard.

Elizabeth asked to have the basic risk assessment form mailed out. Marc will do so.

Melissa: different arborist "reliability" - stories about trees deemed "safe" that weren't and those that were cut down, and turned out to be healthy. Marc: trees are living structures and unique - not like "concrete structure" that is tested for integrity. Trees present "risk". Marc requires MA certified arborist and there is an international certification. Start date of the ordinance - said January 1 and Marc said something about March 1.

Marc understands that Programs and Services passed a March 1 start date and that is what City Council passed.

Commission Business

Beth: standard agenda posted in advance and then just have a "new business" section. This will allow for timely postings.

Tree Removal Requests:

Marc has not received any more tree removal requests and he denied the last ones. He doesn't know if they have been appealed - that would go to the Mayor.

New Business:

Letter to City Council: Drafted by Ruth, she explained that implementing the Tree Ordinance will (per Marc's feedback at the 12.21.2023 meeting) take quite a lot more work from him and his department and that it essentially an unfunded mandate. Commission reviewed the letter and a discussion ensued about who can do the work and some confusion about who will do the work. Amy made a small edit and said that we should not link override funding to support for Marc post passing of the ordinance. "without a financial boost at this time...." Beth and Ruth will edit this sentence. Leave in reference to the ordinance

Melissa asked what Marc wanted for his staffing. From Marc's perspective, any additional resources that Urban Forestry gets, allows for more flexibility in his job description - Deputy Commissioner (nothing to do with forestry) and Tree Warden. Going to be hard to find someone to do technical side of tree ordinance, but likely find someone to do "truck repair and processing payment" duties.

Howard: "high level of expertise" vs. "high level of education". Remove customers, and use "applicants".

Julie: Thinks the override is a charged word. Can we remove mention of it. Elizabeth agrees. Beth thinks it is necessary - because the Mayor thought the urban tree commission needed more funding. The override acknowledged the need and now the need is that much more urgent. Discussion about whether the word override should be in the letter. Amy thinks we should just focus on the need for more money.

The framework for the override included increased funding for tree ordinance. Proposed budget pre-override and then post override. ARPA money bought more watering trucks for Newton. Specific investment. Is there another place besides the override language that acknowledged the need for more investment in urban tree canopy and urban forestry department. Marc cannot think of another place.

The Mayor has acknowledged that there is a need for more investment in the urban forestry department.

Show of hands to keep the word "override" out of the letter - 2 (nay) - 4 (yay) to keep the word override out of the letter. The word override will be taken out of the letter.

Approved: Send this letter to City Council (unanimous)

Approved: Send a similar letter to Mayor (unanimous)

The following is in the Friday packet: proposed amendments to tree ordinance.

Amendment to Ordinance to allow all "invasive" trees to be taken down (like a yard full of norway maples). Is this Andrea Kelly and Alison Leary? There may be several proposals like this one.

Exempt trees on 1 and 2 family in by right buildable lots - this completely sets back to pre-tree ordinance - current or new ordinance.

This will be on the agenda for next month.

Adjourn: Next Meeting on February 16th.