

Newton Urban Tree Commission
Meeting June 21, 2024 7:45 am
Minutes

Attendance:

Members: Howard Birnbaum, Barbara Darnell, Ruth Goldman, Julia Malakie, Marc Welch.
Guest: Laura Petrillo

Minutes: April and May minutes approvals deferred until the next meeting.

Forestry Department Update:

Quiet on the tree front. Since the last meeting, Mayor approved 3 additional positions to forestry department in the 2024/2025 City budget, plus the department has a vacancy. The new positions include an administrator for tree ordinance (there is a solid internal candidate). It has been posted and Marc is doing interviews. The other three are being advertised. Stump removal starting and will get caught up at the end of the season. Annual tree pruning is taking place and once school is closed they will go onto school grounds and do all the maintenance over the summer or while there is no activity going on (camps etc.). Over the next 1 - 2 months, finalizing the planting list for the fall, about 400 trees (all City of Newton - not tree conservancy, which is typically 100). 500 is the normal size of the fall planting. 95% of plantings are in the fall, with replacements and mulching in the spring. Going to be a challenge to fill all four positions, definitely not by the end of the summer.

Marc is more optimistic about recruiting new people. It took 2 years to hire the last person from recruitment to the lengthy on-boarding process at the city; several candidates bowed out along the way which prolonged the process. Marc will post the jobs immediately with the public and begin the process. There is not an increased workforce in this area that Marc knows of.

Julia: CDBG trees along Washington Street, like the elms, which are now “globes” instead of “vases”. When do they get pruned?

Marc: they have not been pruned. They are a bit larger and would likely need to be done with a bucket truck, which is not done a lot. With the additional personnel, they are hoping to have a full-time crew that would do neighborhood, pro-active pruning of big and small trees. They will have time to do smaller trees (ones planted in the last 5 years). Won't be able to attack these issues until the positions are filled.

Julia: Is someone doing the treatment on the ash trees behind Warren House? Jordan will be doing this.

Update on the Tree Ordinance:

Quick update on the tree ordinance: About 180 permits filed since March 1. The majority (102) are for non-construction related reasons, like dead or problematic trees. Marc has not categorized them yet. 100 is typical for construction related trees in this time period so the

number is down slightly which is to be expected. These are permits that would have been done before the ordinance.

Howard: Will there actually be a data base?

Marc: permits are digital and viewable by the public. The department will track size, species, location and continue to update spreadsheet as the data comes in.

Laura: Are you getting the tree protection plans? And tracking the protection methods?

Marc: There are a lot of tree protection plans but many are very low risk because the new small construction projects are not anywhere near a tree, like a new deck and stairs.

Laura: Will there be tracking and monitoring of the tree protection plan and any trees that are lost.

Marc: Does not have the capability to inspect the tree protection that is going on. The new administrative position gets us back to where we were before. Permits for tree removal on non-construction lots - there are very few of these and very few over 40" and they are typically trees in very bad condition.

Julia: Has there been a permit granted for a tree that was healthy but removed for aesthetic purposes.

Marc: No, there are permits that have not been granted because they are remediating the permit.

Julia: Is there tree cutting happening that has not been permitted on construction sites?

Marc: You cannot get a building permit without a tree permit because Marc signs off on all exterior construction permits so there is little problem with this. But there have been 2 - 3 dead tree removals that happened without permits but these have been remedied. It's been quiet and some cranky people - companies and owners who are cranky about having to get permits. Not as much of this anymore. People just filing permits.

Julia: Would it be helpful to have tree companies registering with the city so they know about the tree permit process?

Marc: Will keep this on the radar. The companies that do business here already know about this. If it's a one-off person, they may not know but unclear if registering will help this situation. Companies that do repeat business, get it and they file the permits regularly and it validates their professionalism.

Howard: Has anything changed as a result of the tree ordinance?

Marc: Need more time to compare data. Non-construction stuff that was never permitted, it will be tough to measure because we have no previous data. The construction feels like we've gotten fewer, but most are not related to tear downs (which is similar to before). Fewer of the usual builders who would tear down buildings. It maybe because arborists are backed up and it's delayed. Not sure if arborists are slowing it down, or building is slowing down - houses are sitting on the market. The last few weeks before the ordinance, there was an uptick in applications.

Marc: Generally, 20 construction related permits a month and we are at 80 for 3.5 months, so we are on target. Large homes are unsold and a lot of the landscaping has not been done.

Laura: Any updates on amendments? Or anything coming out of meeting in April where there was disgruntlement with tree protection plans?

Marc: Reiterated that the department wants to wait a year to see how this plays out before any changes are made. The only thing that came out of the April meeting, Marc worked with law department to clarify impact on neighbors trees.

Julia: Any tree protection plans for significant construction that is affecting neighbor's trees.

Marc: Have had some plans that include neighbors trees but can't determine if they are big projects. A lot of plans from Save a Tree, a national company. People are using this form which is a national standard. Some plans are better than others and some arborists are better than others. Fine tuning the plans. We use the industry standard risk assessment form and any certified arborist should be able to fill this out but getting complaints about people filling this out. Changed the wording to say "risk assessment certified arborist". Marc is thinking he will provide some sample tree protection plans to make it as easy as possible.

Julia: Do you have sample tree removal permits?

Marc: Construction permits should be up for a while because they are often months away from starting. Some builders choose to do it early on, so they can get the building permit more smoothly.

Julia: Pending tear down on Adams street that has a big abutter's tree.

Tree removal requests:

No current tree removal requests, not even a hint of one! Haven't had any in a while.

Julia: did they save the Ward street trees?

Marc: Not sure they have even started the work. It's a big pipe and a big hole.

Ruth: They might be waiting until school is out to do a big project like this.

Marc: They were going to start in May or June but pretty sure it hasn't started.

New Business

Howard: Melissa Brown doing a project on tagging trees??

Julia: They were denied by Nicole Banks.

Marc: Commissioner denied the ability to post on city owned trees. But we are meeting with the group next week.

Howard: Thought it was an excellent educational project. Curious why it was denied.

Marc: Once you allow someone to post something, they you have to allow everyone to post something. Similar to banners so now we don't hang anything.

Julia: if the city posted it, then it would be fine.

Marc: A lot of challenges keep coming up and the law department is concerned.

Julia: There are blue ribbons on trees?

Marc: We are removing stuff from trees all the time - including parking restrictions, etc. Trees and polls are becoming billboards for everything. Parks, Rec - light polls, trees anything that is property of Parks and Rec. Not sure what utilities are doing.

Marc: Very confusing because Eversource uses blue ribbons to mark polls that need work!

Summer Meetings:

Marc is not available for the scheduled July meeting (July 19). Ruth suggested rescheduling. There was general agreement to have one meeting this summer in the July/August time frame. Beth and Marc will determine the date.

