

Urban Tree Commission Minutes

July 22, 2022

In attendance: Marc Welch
Howard Birnbaum
Julia Malakie
Amy Sangiolo
Elizabeth Sockwell
Beth Wilkinson
Julie Winsett

Guest: Melissa Brown

Opening and Minutes

Marc shared the news that Elizabeth Sockwell is now an official member of the Urban Tree Commission. Beth congratulated Elizabeth and welcomed her to the Tree Commission.

Julia started to record the meeting.

The minutes of the June 10 meeting were approved.

Forestry Report:

Marc reported that with the calm weather we've had this summer, business has been proceeding as usual for his staff. They have been focusing on at-risk tree removals and service requests.

There still is a vacancy on the Urban Forestry staff, which may be filled in the next couple months. Not having full crews affects how much can be done concurrently.

Staff members also have started to identify fall planting spots, marking 95% of what will be planted. Abutters will be notified within the next month. Ten to fifteen percent of abutters ask not to have trees near their property, and those trees will be reassigned to other spots.

Tree Removals:

Marc said that there will be a request to remove 2-3 trees at a property on Sawmill Brook Parkway because of the change in the location of a driveway.

There also will be a request for a Newton Centre site at which they are reconfiguring the cross walk near a business.

Questions:

Howard said that someone contacted him because they were told that there will be a 10-year wait before they can get the street tree they requested. Marc explained that because Newton has not

had significant planting for decades and because of tree loss during that time, it will take years to catch up. In 1990, the city had 37,000 trees, and it now has approximately 21,000 trees. He said that it is a better use of city money to do whole streets at once rather than individual sites scattered throughout the city. That is true for watering as well as for the initial planting.

Marc provided further history. He said that it was only in 2015 that there started to be some city money allocated for tree planting. Even though Marc developed an overall planting plan at that point, there was sufficient money for only a small amount of planting. In 2017, more money was allocated. Under the current plan, it will take fifteen years to fill all currently vacant planting sites. The city partners with Newton Tree Conservancy to plant 600 – 800 trees each year.

In the past, the focus was on planting trees in areas of the city that had the greatest percentage of open spots. Now, there also is a focus on areas that have the least overall tree canopy and the greatest area of heat islands.

Currently, the department is covering two to three snow routes (one way that the city is divided) each year. As there get to be fewer open spots, they probably will cover five routes each year.

The specific planting plan is reassessed every five years. Marc shared the current planting plan.

Melissa asked what will be done if there is no berm in an area. Marc replied that the department will do an off-berm planting if an owner is interested. Melissa asked specifically about Newton Upper Falls, where there are fewer berms, and Marc said that they will find a way to offer off-berm planting to those residents. The commission members discussed using the Mayor's newsletter, leafletting, and sending letters to residents. Marc said that they're most likely to send letters.

Amy asked about coordinating planting with the DPW as new sidewalks are installed. She gave Dudley Road as an example. Marc said that is part of the "Complete Streets" approach. He said that he also works with the DPW to prevent damage to existing trees.

Howard asked what it will take for the city to increase the budget for planting more trees. Marc pointed out that it is critical to be able to care for the trees that are planted. New trees won't survive if there isn't staff to water them, and they won't thrive without pruning as they grow. Also, it's important not to plant a large percentage of trees at the same time so that they don't all die at the same time. Marc explained that when Newton Tree Conservancy was formed, they were strong advocates for more pruning before more planting.

Julia mentioned the importance of having a diversity of species of trees as protection from disease and pests.

Update to Tree Ordinance

Marie Lawler, the city lawyer who was consulting with Marc and City Councilors Julia and Emily Norton has retired. A new lawyer, Jenn, is now working on the project. She submitted and updated draft to Marc and the Councilors, and they are reviewing it. No action is expected in July or August. An updated version of changes proposed by the Councilors is expected to be voted on by the Programs and Services Committee in September. Julia will send a draft of the changes to UTC members (and did so during the meeting).

City Street Tree Plan

There is no new information on City Street Tree Plan. Marc may have more information at our meeting in September or October.

New Business

Julia asked who can be reached about problems related to the Tree Ordinance outside of regular working hours. She had trouble finding help when trees were cut down on a property in West Newton the day after it sold. Marc said that he is the only person with the power to enforce the Tree Ordinance. (He said that, if necessary, he can designate another member of his staff to do so as well.) He said that the police dispatchers are aware of that and have his phone number to refer any calls about the ordinance to him.

Amy asked about the status of the Newton Cemetery's appeal for trees that they plan to remove. Marc reported that the Mayor has not yet made a decision. Howard mentioned that while biking along Commonwealth Avenue, he's seen trees removed from the cemetery and wondered whether they were proceeding in advance of the ruling. Marc said that he approved the removal of some trees that were in poor condition.

Amy reported that Mark Development contributed money for trees to be removed from the property of the First Unitarian Universalist Church on Washington Street to create a parking lot. She said that the lot would be used for more parking for a daycare during the day and for Mark Development to use in the evening.