

Managing Roadside Trees: How to Develop a Tree Care Management Plan

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A municipality is responsible for providing safe passage for our mobile society, and from time to time this includes work on the roadside or right-of-way tree. Sometimes tree work must be done in emergency situations, sometimes the work is performed as part of ongoing annual maintenance, and sometimes (if budgets allow) the work is contracted. Some pitfalls and problems are associated with right-of-way tree care, but by following some common-sense tips from professional arborists, your municipality can improve its roadside tree maintenance programs and avoid these problems.



WHY MAINTAIN ROADSIDE TREES

Secure Public Safety and Reduce Potential Liability

The prime directive for municipal officials is to secure the health, safety, and welfare of their citizens, and this applies when dealing with right-of-way (ROW) trees. Low-hanging branches, diseased or dead trees and limbs, and trees too close to the road can become hazards to the traveling public. Keeping municipal employees safe while working on roads is of prime concern, too.

While managing trees, municipalities will also want to reduce their exposure to lawsuits that may occur as a result of a tree failure or some real (or imagined) negligent act.

So, does your municipality have a regular tree inspection program? If not, perhaps it should. If so, do you document your findings? Having an inspection program is important, but if you do not act on it and manage the risk trees create, then your municipality could have problems down the road if a personal injury or property damage claim results from a falling roadside tree or tree part. A properly designed tree risk management program is easy to implement and can be done inexpensively in-house with some basic employee training. The important thing to remember is that by taking small steps toward developing a tree risk plan, your municipality will minimize its exposure to risk.

Another liability concern involves safe operations by the road crew when doing roadside tree work. The work is dangerous, and there are many hazards to consider—chainsaw safety, chipper safety, work on an elevated platform, and traffic control. Everything about roadside tree care has an associated hazard or safety concern.

Promote Proper Tree Health and Care

In many municipalities, roadside tree care means taking a flail or boom mower down the road to cut whatever is in the right-of-way. While this may be time efficient (which is debatable), it is not good for the unfortunate trees that are in the path of the mower. This kind of blanket treatment will cause a lot of damage to the trees and may lead to disease, insect infestation, and even tree mortality. Trees respond better to proper pruning and trimming, and this alternative may ultimately be cheaper for your municipality since trim cycles can last longer than boom mowing.

Obviously, a tree in poor health to begin with is probably better removed than spending money on trimming, but any decent or specimen trees should be incorporated into a well-planned tree care management plan.

Save Money

Planning for the care of your municipality's trees is not as big a task as you might think, and if properly implemented, it can actually save money in the long run. A properly designed plan will include provisions for tree maintenance, tree risk analysis, tree removal, and tree planting. If done right, the ultimate cost for annual roadside tree maintenance will drastically reduce over the length of time (typically five to seven years) for which the plan is designed. The savings for reducing any risk associated with right-of-way trees cannot be overlooked. And remember, a properly designed plan will apply to trees in parks and recreational areas, too.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

In the world of arboriculture, the ANSI Z133 standards are the undeniable book of rules for safety management and guidelines. As is the case with most American National Standards Institute (ANSI) standards, they are voluntary, but it would be foolish to ignore these standards. In existence for more than 40 years, they make sense and are the industry-recognized guidelines. What you may not know is that these standards were developed for anyone who performs tree care operations. In fact, the introductory section of the manual specifically discusses the application of the standard to local, state, and federal agencies.

The ANSI standards can be used as a guideline for implementing a workplace safety program for municipal tree care operations. These standards cover every aspect of tree care operations, and by becoming familiar with the contents of the guide, your road crew will understand the safety requirements for working around trees and tree care equipment.

PRUNING STANDARDS

ANSI also has standards for tree pruning in addition to all other aspects of tree care operations. The ANSI pruning standards include the following:

- Definitions – particularly useful when preparing bid and contract documents
- Pruning practices – includes how to make pruning cuts and wound treatments
- Pruning objectives – pruning for structural or clearance
- Pruning methods – crown thinning, crown raising, crown reduction, and crown restoration
- Pruning specifications – a flowchart for writing pruning specs

This document is particularly useful if you contract tree care services and want to include up-to-date industry-recognized guidelines in the contract. By employing the terminology from the definitions section, you will add clarity to your communications with contactors.

OPTIONS FOR TREE MANAGEMENT

There are a number of ways you can develop a management plan for the care of your municipality's right-of-way trees. You can do it in-house and manage it as a part of the road crew's work schedule. (You might want to hire a consulting arborist



Sometimes, a tree may require an arborist to provide proper pruning.

to assist with the preliminary steps.) You can hire a consulting arborist to develop and manage the plan. Or, you can ask someone in your community who has experience with tree management to lend a hand and volunteer his or her services. It is also a good idea to establish a shade tree commission and charge its members with the task of implementing and managing a tree care plan.

Since implementing a tree maintenance plan is budget driven, be sure the elected officials are in agreement on the breadth and depth of a management plan. You do not want to go to all the trouble to develop a plan and then find out there is no funding available for implementation. If you are able to enlist the services of an arborist, he or she will really help with the format and layout for the plan and how to identify what is important and has a high potential risk) and what has lower priorities.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- The International Society of Arboriculture: www.isa-arbor.com
- American Society of Consulting Arborists: www.asca-consultants.org
- American National Standards Institute: www.ansi.org
- Urban and Community Forestry in PA: <http://pubs.cas.psu.edu/FreePubs/pdfs/uh110.pdf>
- Urban Forestry Links: www.pacommunityforests.com