

# Health of Urban Trees

## Topic of Conference

By LINDA CASE

Most people say they love trees. Yet, in one way or another, often they spurn them. Private owners cut them down, begrudging the annual task of raking leaves. Contractors deem them “in the way.” Town governments do not devote enough resources to simple maintenance.

After years of neglect, a big old tree can become a danger. Only then does public works react--stepping in to chop it down, at a huge cost. The approach is wasteful in the long run. And it results in an increasing loss of tree stock.

These are some of the issues talked about Thursday, October 23, at a day-long conference in Wallingford “Who Needs Healthy Trees?--Learning the Basic Needs of Trees in Urban Spaces.”

It was hosted by the Connecticut Urban Forest Council, along with the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection. It was organized by council president Mary Ludwig.

The event drew 165 participants from all over the state. They included tree wardens, environmentalists, arborists and others who care about the cause. It marked the 20th anniversary of the program.

“To plant a tree--that’s the most fundamentally human thing a person can do,” said keynote speaker, Bill Finch, mayor of Bridgeport. He reported he would be issuing a proclamation the next day calling for Bridgeport to become one of the greenest cities in the country. Each and every department will be charged with doing its work in the soundest, least polluting, manner. It makes sense environmentally. It saves money.

“Bad as it is, the current economic crunch may spark opportunities,” he went on. It could galvanize the public to return to basics, cooperate more with neighbors, and live closer together rather than generating more and more sprawl.

Density, more than anything else, combats climate change, he said. He called that issue “the biggest one we have ever faced as a society.” Anything that makes it easier for people to live closely together is a plus. An abundance of trees, he said, makes residents feel more comfortable, more secure.

Throughout the conference, speakers echoed the mayor’s points. Namely that the presence of trees is invaluable to communities. Apart from obvious health benefits, they add value to real estate; slow down cars; and reduce energy usage.

Six breakout sessions during the day focused on ways of enhancing the urban tree stock. The topics were planting; doing construction projects in a sustainable manner; tapping new sources of money. Also, probing roots; treating diseases; and dealing effectively with local governments.

Joanne DiCamillo of Old Lyme told how she helped organize a tree commission in that town. This happened several years ago after 21 large trees along historic Lyme Street were cut

down by the utility company. It took that incident to galvanize the public. Belatedly they realized the preciousness of the specimens that had been lost.

Today the committee operates in a proactive manner, not a reactive one. They even work cordially with CL&P. Now, as a result of citizen activism, officials fully recognize the value of trees to the town, she said.

Throughout the conference speakers stressed the importance of maintaining existing tree stocks, as well as adding new plantings. It is critical that trees be pruned and attended to. Otherwise, major problems crop up.

Throughout the state there have been rampant cut downs along streets and other public domains. This approach turns out to be costly, as well as damaging to local sensibility.

Governments will change their policies if people point out how they are wasting money. "You can motivate your town by quantifying the whole thing," said Tom Degnan, an environmental scientist who is also the tree warden of Old Lyme.

"You literally can compute the numbers. It costs thousands to cut down a big specimen. That's one huge expense. Towns don't like those. The alternative is small outlays-- done over time (to preserve and upkeep)."

Both town officials as well as private property owners must be educated on the value of trees. "A house with a big tree in front" can sell for thousands more than one without such greenery, he said.

Others at the conference reported successes in sparking arboreal awareness. Norwalk, for instance, has an effective Tree Alliance. Milford too is expanding its stock.

"You've got to start slow," says conference attendee Dan Landau of Norwalk. "Get public works involved. Get other officials on board."

"Nagging-- that's what works," added Joanne DiCamillo, the Old Lyme activist. But once momentum starts, a lot of citizens get enthusiastic about a campaign.

Traditionally, most Connecticut towns featured tree-lined streets with overarching canopies. Some of that feeling may be going by the wayside, according to some tree wardens present. There are just too many factors today impinging: utility company right of ways; narrow snow shelves; liability issues as trees age.

So there may be a trend toward encouraging private owners themselves to plant specimens within their own yards, as well.

Other experts disagree. The public sector must continue too. Regularized tree borders along sidewalks are invaluable. They should not be regarded as luxuries or mere annoyances to traffic engineers and officials.

Former Connecticut State Forester Donald H. Smith gave the closing talk at the conference. Having gone to college in Maine, he had been convinced "that's where the real forests were." Later on, he had "an epiphany."... He realized "the rural forest and the urban forest are really interconnected. Especially in Connecticut. Each is vital. It's time for us to broaden our perspective."

*[Linda Case is a freelance writer from Wethersfield. She is a frequent contributor to the Place section in The Hartford Courant.]*

