

Double Trouble: An Interim Report to The Tree Next Door

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Background

Citing budget constraints, on July 1 the City of Atlanta reduced the field arborist staff in the Bureau of Buildings from five to two. Seeking a baseline to track anticipated changes in on-site arborist inspections, The Tree Next Door asked for and received the inspection records entered in the City database of all the field arborists for the first six months of 2010 (see “COA Field Arborist Productivity, January – June 2010: A Report to The Tree Next Door” posted at www.treenextdoor.org in August 2010).

The field book entries that underlie the database were requested at the same time, but received scant attention. One of the two field arborists retained in July, Stan Domengeaux, claimed that he had lost his field books for the first five months of the year. When his June field book became available a cursory inspection raised alarm. A full, line-by-line examination revealed severe discrepancies between what Domengeaux entered into his field book and what he entered in the database (see “Unanticipated, Unexplained and Incongruous Data Emerges: An Addendum to the Field Arborist Productivity Report” at www.treenextdoor.org).

Though the “Unanticipated...” paper questioned the very validity of many of Domengeaux’s field book entries – as well as the fact that fully 75 per cent of his field book entries were not recorded in the database – the Department of Planning made a crude attempt to avoid further investigation by adding some of the missing field book entries into the database, months after the inspections supposedly occurred. This action met with a charge of foul play by TTND (see “City of Atlanta Planning Department Opts for Cover-up” at www.treenextdoor.org).

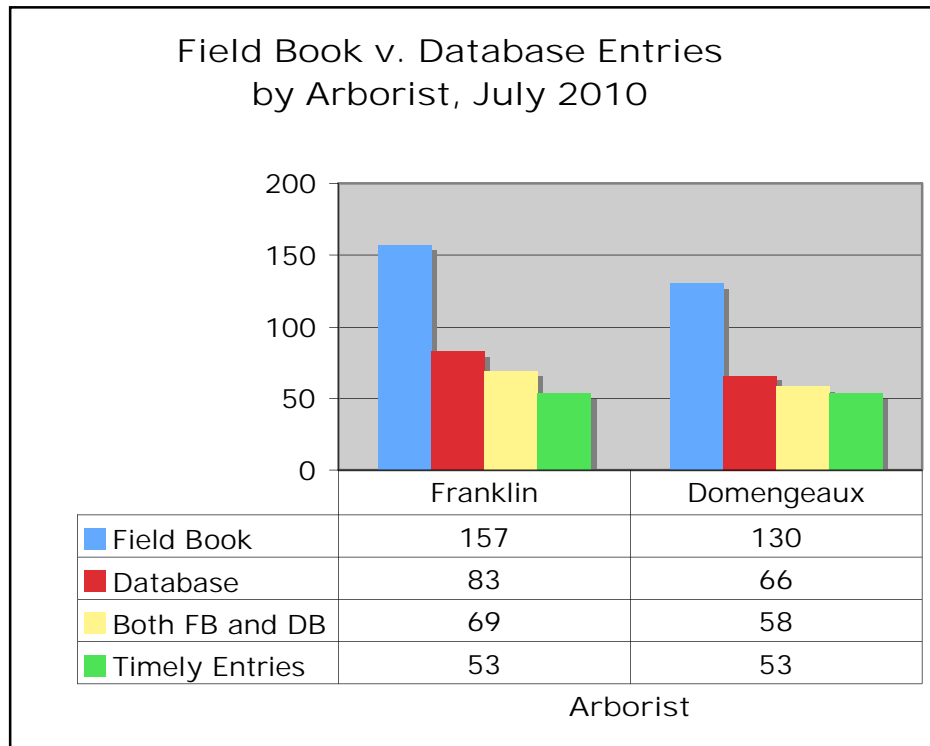
Introduction

On October 1, 2010, TTND made another Open Records request for the field book and database records of the field arborists for the third quarter (July through September) of 2010. The City provided the records for the two arborists retained in July, Domengeaux and Michael Franklin, as well as the September records for David Tachon, who was rehired after the July 1 staff reduction and began work on September 2. The present paper focuses on the July data, to be followed by analyses of August and September as they are completed.

(I encourage replication and testing of this study by both the City and any interested observer. The data is on file in the Planning Department. The TTND paid a copy fee of \$68 for 272 pages @ \$0.25/page. I assume they are available to anyone making an Open Records request for them.)

Data Presentation and Brief Discussion

Chart 1:

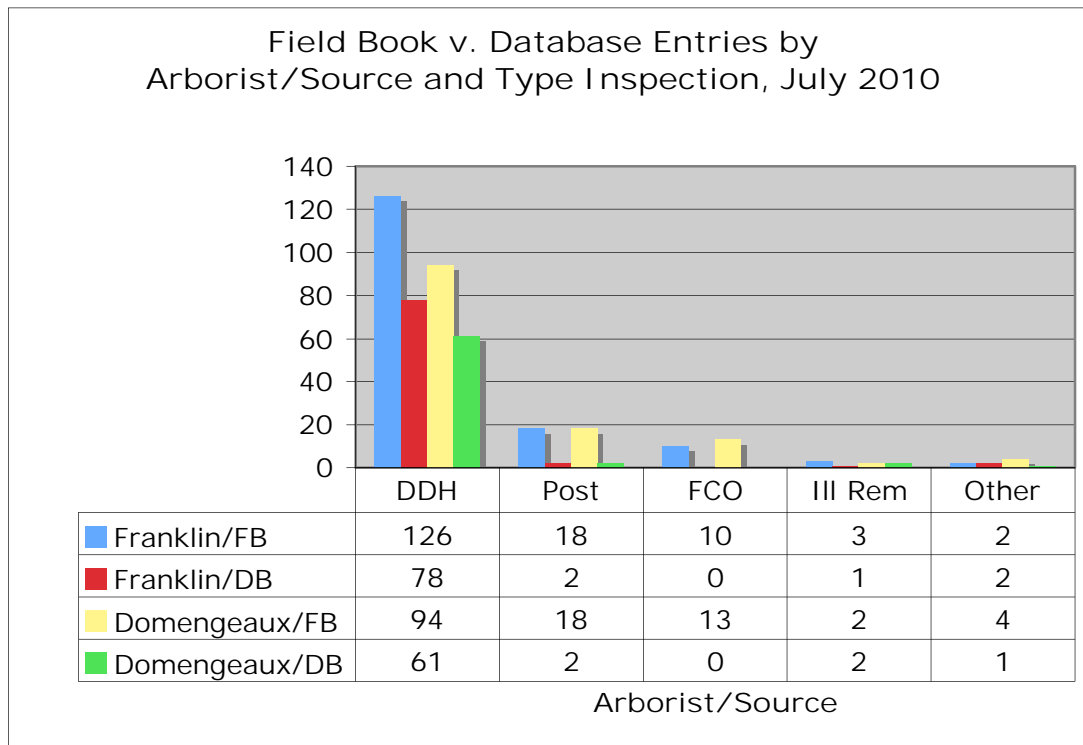


This most basic of graphs reveals a strikingly similar pattern of behavior by Franklin and Domengeaux:

- Slightly more than half of both Franklin's (53%) and Domengeaux's (51%) field book entries appear in the database.
- An even smaller percentage of the field book entries are matched with database entries (Both FB and DB): 44% for Franklin, 45% for Domengeaux.
- Database entries are matched with field book entries (Both FB and DB) 83% of the time for Franklin, 88% for Domengeaux
- "Timely Entries" are those transferred from the field book to the database within one working day as required by the arborist division's Standards of Practice (see

Field Book and Daily Report standards at www.treenextdoor.org). Franklin was timely 77% of the time, Domengeaux 91% of the time on this relatively small subset of inspections that appear in both field book and database. One entry for Domengeaux is “super-timely,” appearing in the database one day before it appears in his field book.

Chart 2:



Where FB = Field Book

DB = Database

DDH = Dead, dying or hazardous tree inspections

Post = Orange, Yellow or White sign postings

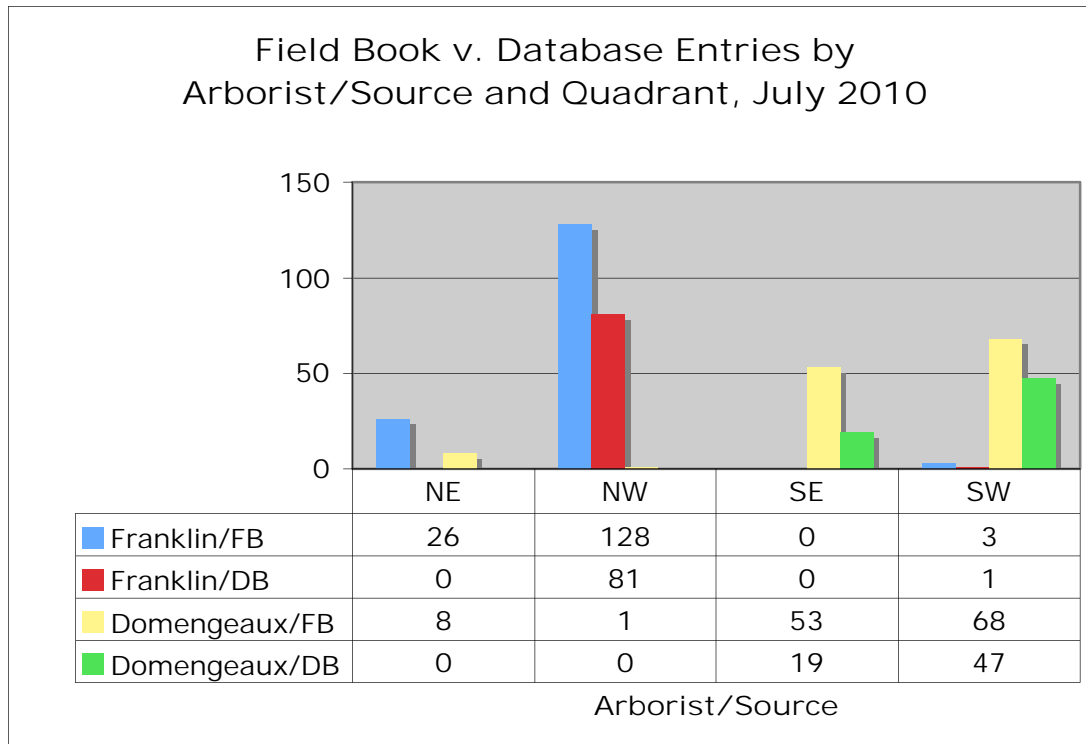
FCO = Inspections for Final Certificate of Occupancy

Ill Rem = Charges or investigations of illegal tree removal or destruction

Other = Site visits, nuisance tree evaluations, etc.

It is important to recognize that nothing happens – no tree removal permit is issued, no time-sensitive posting is registered, no Certificate of Occupancy can be completed, no calculation of recompense for illegal removals can be made, no machinery for removal of nuisance trees is implemented – without a database entry. In other words, over 1/3 of the DDH inspections allegedly made by both Franklin (38%) and Domengeaux (37%) in July did not result in tree removal permits either approved or denied. Similarly, only 11% of either arborist’s postings and none of their inspections for Certificates of Occupancy were recorded. So much for Customer Service.

Chart 3:



Some of the missing entries in the database may have legitimate explanation. For example, neither Franklin nor Domengeaux were assigned to the NE quadrant. It is possible that entries for the NE may be erroneously attributed to Arboricultural Manager Ainsley Caldwell or others. Nonetheless, 47 (37%) of Franklin's inspections in the NW and 66 (55%) of Domengeaux's inspections in the SE and SW are not accounted for in the database – and these were their respective assigned quadrants.

Violations...

Numerous violations of both policy and law are evident in these figures. Many mandatory Standards of Practice of the arborist division are breached, including the Field Book standard, the Daily Report standard, the Illegal Removal/Destructions standard, the Dead, Dying and Hazardous Tree Inspection standard, and the standards for the various postings (orange, yellow and white signs). These Standards of Practice are integral to the Tree Protection Ordinance and necessary for its implementation.

Departmental Standards of Conduct are also violated, among them Article 1 (“Employees shall obey all applicable laws of the city, state and federal government”), Article 7 (“Employees shall provide and perform their professional duties ... in a timely

and competent manner”) and Article 22 (“Employees shall be truthful in their verbal and written communications at all time”). Caldwell, Franklin’s and Domengeaux’s supervisor, is in clear violation of Article 33 (“Supervisory employees shall enforce the policies, procedures, rules and regulations of the department and the City of Atlanta”) – as are his superiors if they continue to fail to act.

City law is also ignored in these violations of department and division standards, with specific causes for disciplinary action that include, among others:

- Negligence in performing assigned duties (Sec. 114-528(b)(1);
- Incompetence, inability or failure to perform assigned duties... (Sec. 114-528(b)(2); and
- Failure to carry out an official directive...(Sec. 114-528(b)(3)

And yet to date the City’s response to this unfolding series of violations has been ... dead silence. The field arborists are not held accountable; the arboricultural manager is not held accountable; the head of the bureau is not held accountable; the commissioner is not held accountable; and so on up the chain of command and line of responsibility.

In the meantime, scarce tax dollars allocated for the implementation and enforcement of the Tree Protection Ordinance are simply being wasted. An expensive database critical to the functioning of the City is allowed to be compromised. The manager in charge is asleep at the wheel; his superiors sit on their hands. This is not good government.

These violations also mean that the data necessary for any long-term study of the workings of the arborist division are corrupt and unreliable, both for TTND and the City itself. The GIGO rule – Garbage In, Garbage Out – certainly seems to apply to the recorded (and unrecorded) work of both field arborists retained by the city in July 2010.