

One Arborist for the Price of Three:
COA Field Arborist Productivity, First Quarter 2011

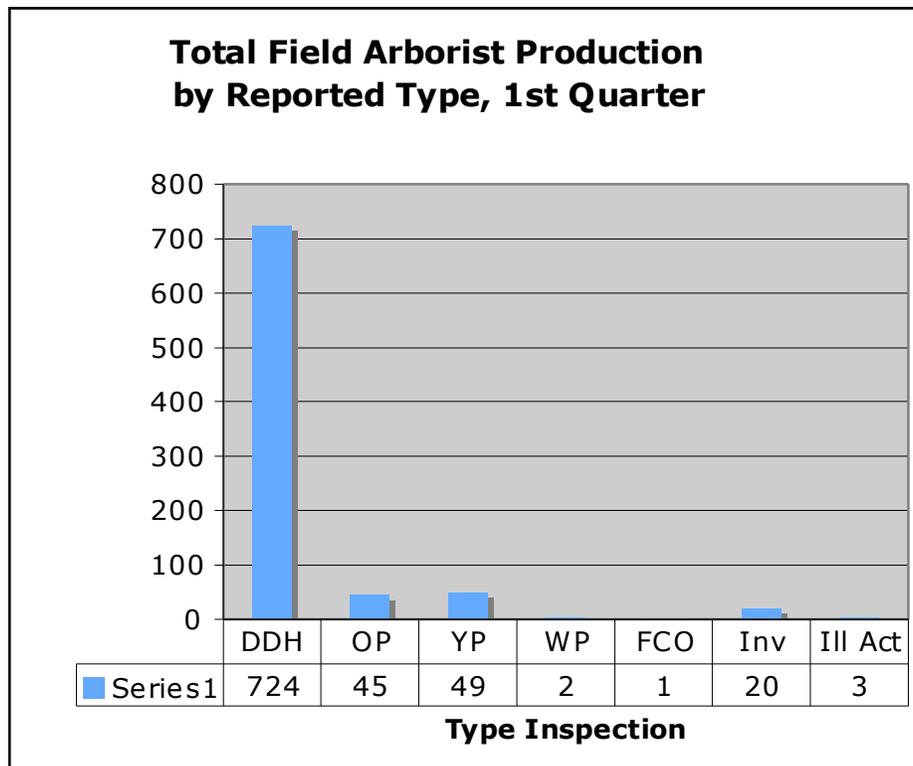
A Report to The Tree Next Door
By Tom Coffin, Ph.D.

Introduction

In early May The Tree Next Door made an Open Records request for the daily field activities of each of the field arborists in the Office of Buildings for March 2011. This paper combines the March records with the previously received data for January and February (see “Nice Work If You Can Get It” at www.treenextdoor.org). Since that earlier paper TTND has learned that (1) the inspection data is transmitted to the City’s servers wirelessly in real time from computers mounted in the arborists’ vehicles and (2) the arborists are now *prohibited* from using field books or other auxiliary means to record notes in the field. As far as we know, the data presented here is the complete, official and only record of the field activities performed in the arborist division during this period.

Part 1: Basic Productivity Assessment

Figure 1: Combined Production by Reported Type of Inspection



Where DDH = Dead, Dying or Hazardous tree inspections
 OP = Orange sign postings (pre-plan review)
 YP = Yellow sign postings (post-plan review)
 WP = White sign postings (appeal postings)
 FCO = Final Certificate of Occupancy inspections
 Inv = Investigations
 Ill Act = Illegal Activity investigations

Hiatus: Discussion of Activities and Time Requirements

Individual tree inspections (DDH) account for 86% of field arborist activity in the first quarter. The field arborist's job is to determine if an applied-for tree meets the legal criteria for removal or not. Dead trees – which make up a large percentage of removal requests – require virtually no evaluation time. Though there are exceptions, Dying (or Diseased) and Hazardous tree evaluations for permitting purposes normally require 10 minutes or less. Data entry and transmittal is done at the time and place of inspection.

In the aforementioned City Law Department's "Investigative Report" on the arborist division issued at the end of February, Tachon is quoted as stating "that an arborist should do 10 dead, dying, hazardous permits a day." In March 2011 Tachon performed between 11 and 15 DDH inspections on six separate days; Franklin performed between 10 and 12 DDH inspections on four days; and even Domengeaux made one day of 10 and one day of 11 such inspections, apparently without complaint.

Orange, Yellow and White sign postings are the bulk (11%) of the remainder of arborist activities in the first quarter. Orange (5%) and White (0.2%) postings require time only to write an address and date on a prepared signboard, post it in the ground, and record the activity on the computer, total five minutes max. On Yellow postings (6%), done to the Standards of Practice, the field arborist's job is to ensure that the approved site plan matches the site. Though there are significant exceptions, most Yellow sign postings take 10 minutes or less, plus recording time at the computer – two minutes at most.

Final Certificate of Occupancy (FCO) inspections (0.1%), like Yellow sign postings, require matching site to plan. Performed to Standards, most FCO inspections require 10 minutes or less, plus recording time.

Investigations (2%) are also time variable. Again, 10 minutes or less plus recording time is a reasonable estimate, with rare exceptions.

Illegal Removal investigations (0.3%) are potentially the most time consuming in terms of both evidence gathering and database entry requirements. Ten minutes might be a minimum, an hour a maximum under most circumstances. As noted in Figure 1, there were three such Illegal Removal investigations in the quarter, an average of one per month.

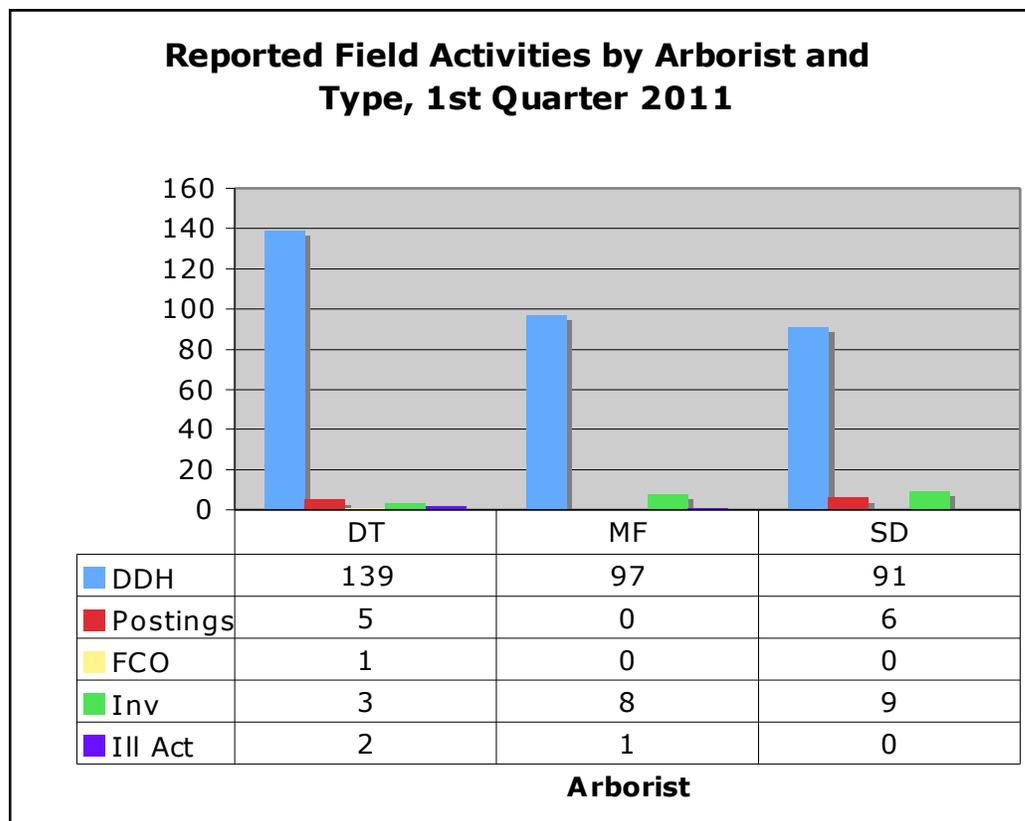
Travel time between sites is variable but not entirely unpredictable. An efficient, pre-planned route delivers far more bang for the buck than a haphazard, unplanned route. However, the adage that “Work expands to fill the time available” also plays a role, particularly when the volume of inspections is as low as it is now.

End Hiatus, Return to Figure 1

Dividing the total 844 reported field activities by the 63 workdays in the first quarter yields an average of 13.4 inspections per day – a reasonable workload for a single arborist, a very easy workload for two. Dividing 13.4 average inspections per day by three arborists indicates that each arborist on average performed 4.5 inspections per day in the first quarter.

Another way to look at it: On average, each and every inspection made by a field arborist in the first quarter of 2011 cost the Atlanta taxpayer 1.8 hours in pay and benefits.

Figure 2: Individual Arborist Production



Where DT = David Tachon
 MF = Michael Franklin
 SD = Stan Domengeaux

DDH = Dead, Dying or Hazardous Tree Inspections
 Postings = Combined Orange, Yellow and White sign postings
 FCO = Final Certificate of Occupancy inspections
 Inv = Investigations
 Ill Act = Investigations of Illegal Removal/Destruction complaints

Figure 2 indicates that Tachon performed about 41%, Franklin 33% and Domengeaux 26% of the total reported field arborist activities. For the 1st quarter of 2011, Tachon averaged 5.6 inspections per day, Franklin 4.4 and Domengeaux 3.5. In hourly terms, Tachon required and was paid for 1.4 hours per inspection on average, Franklin 1.8 hours and Domengeaux 2.3 hours. If these figures at all represent relative efficiency, Tachon was 22% more efficient than Franklin and 39% more efficient than Domengeaux. Franklin was 22% more efficient than Domengeaux.

Part 2: Part-time Work/Full-time Pay

The average production figures above assume fieldwork performed on each paid workday during the quarter. Such figures accurately determine the relative cost, in terms of paid time, of each activity as performed by the total arborist division and by each individual arborist.

The inordinate average time required for each inspection also gives some indirect indication of paid arborist *inactivity*. If the average time for an inspection is 10 minutes and a generous five minutes is assumed for data entry, the average 1.8 hour/inspection retains 93 minutes for prior planning and for travel between sites. Grant an extremely generous 33 minutes on average for pre-planning and for travel between inspections and each arborist retains, on average, an hour free time per inspection, with no oversight and no accountability.

Figure 3 adds to this picture of paid inactivity on the part of the field arborists:

Figure 3: Reported “No Work” days

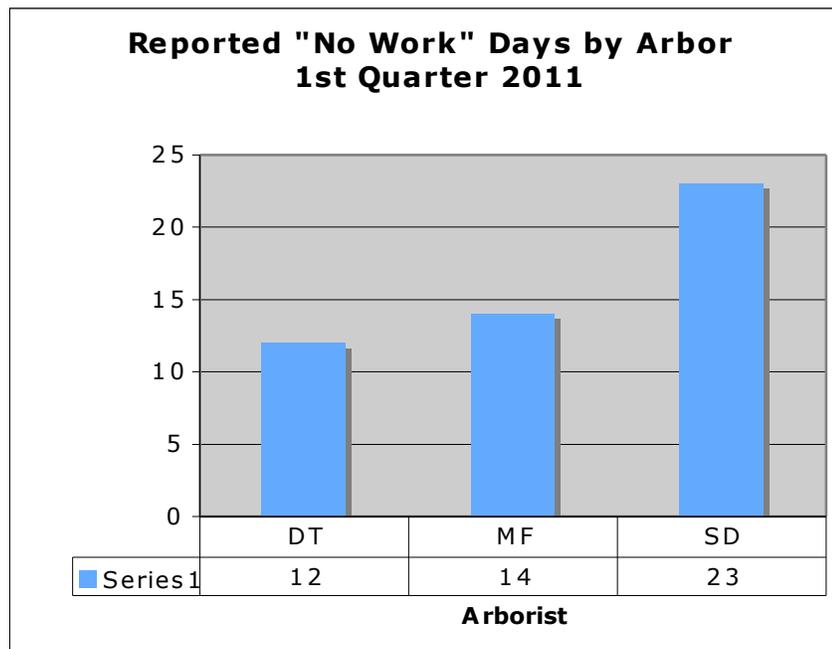
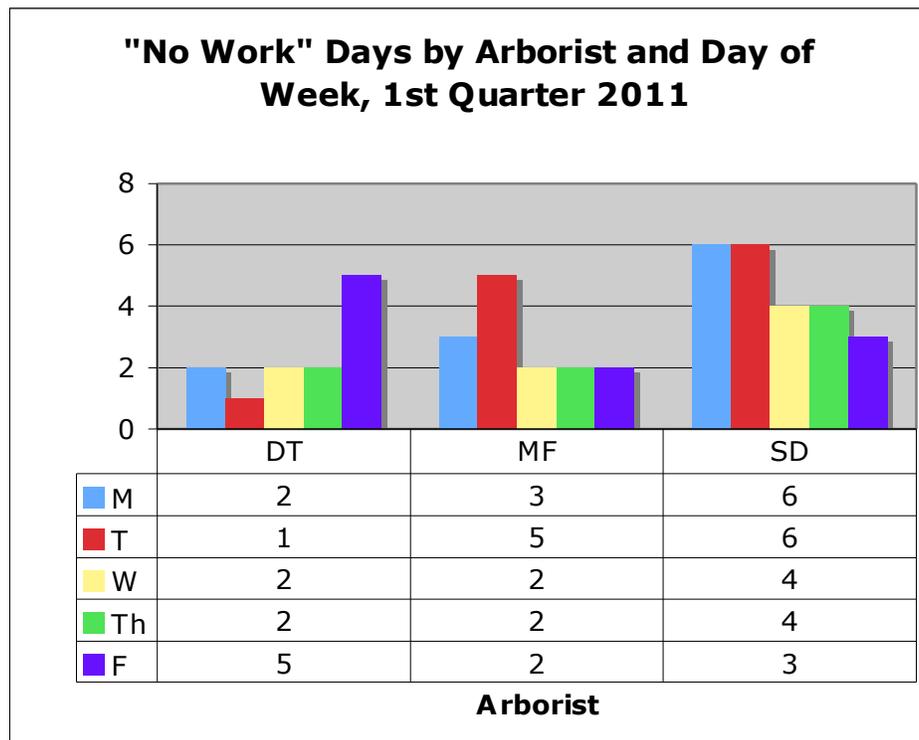


Figure 3 abstracts from the Arborist Inspections Report the number of workdays in the quarter that an individual arborist recorded no field activities. Tachon (DT) did no fieldwork 19% of the time in the first quarter, Franklin (MF) 22% and Domengeaux (SD) 37%. These numbers translate roughly to four-day workweeks for Tachon and Franklin, three-day workweeks for Domengeaux.

Figure 4: “No Work” Days by Day of Week



It is interesting that patterns of behavior begin to emerge from even these very small numbers. We might say, for example, that Tachon is more than twice as likely to report no fieldwork on Friday than on any other day of the week, while Franklin seems to have some preference for Tuesdays. Domengeaux’s pattern is most apparent. If the pattern holds over time, the City can expect no field presence by Domengeaux on roughly half of all Mondays and Tuesdays, one out of three Wednesdays and Thursdays, and one out of four Fridays of every week.

Part 3: The “Enforcement” Record and the Accela Citizen Database

The foregoing discussion highlights serious problems of inefficiency, absenteeism and lack of accountability in the field arborist operation in the Office of Buildings. The Tree Next Door, however, has long focused on the lack of enforcement of the tree protection ordinance as its “most important” issue. Thus in addition to its Open Records request for an account of the daily field activities of the arborist division, TTND requested a full accounting of enforcement activities – Correction Notices, Stop Work orders, Illegal Removal recompense demands and Citations to Municipal Court.

The City responded with (A) Arborist Inspection Reports, providing the numbers for the foregoing analysis, (B) field arborist email responses concerning Stop Work orders and Citations, and (C) the statement that Correction Notices and Recompense demands are “Available in Accela Citizen using the information from the list from item 1”. Figure 5 amalgamates the information from these responses to the extent possible.

Figure 5: First Quarter Enforcement Activities

Arborist	Correction Notices	Stop Work orders	Ill. Recompense Demands	Citations
Tachon	0	1	1	0
Franklin	0	0	1	0
Domengeaux	0	0	0	0

I believe Figure 5 is accurate, but complications with or inadequacies of the Accela Citizen database prevent certainty.

- Any enforcement activities would be recorded in the 20 “Investigations” and three “Illegal Removals” reported for the quarter (see Figure 2 above). The three reported “Illegal Removals” appear on the Accela Citizen database, two with specific details of trees illegally removed, one marked “In Compliance” and closed. However, there is no record of any of the “Investigations” on the Accela Citizen database, either by address or permit number, despite their appearance on the Arborist Inspections Report produced by the City.
- Since all of the “Investigations” catalogued in the Arborist Inspections Report are marked closed either as “Complete” (11), “In Compliance” (3), or “No Violation Found” (6), I assume that no one issued any Correction Notices during the quarter ... but cannot prove or disprove my assumption on Accela Citizen.
- Both Franklin and Domengeaux acknowledge via email that they issued no Stop Work orders from January through March. The single Stop Work order credited to Tachon relies on his email assertion that “The only Stop Work Order I issued during that time was for 688 Mountain Way NE.” There is no indication on the Accela Citizen permit record itself of the issuance of a Stop Work order, though Illegal Recompense demands are recorded for the property.
- All three arborists report that they issued no Citations on their email responses to acting Arboricultural Manager Frank Mobley’s inquiry.
- Most problematic is Domengeaux’s email response, which states in full: “Frank, I haven’t issued any citations to municipal court, or written any Stop Work Orders during the requested time. However, I have issued several fines for illegal tree removal.” Nothing in the record received to date provides evidence for Domengeaux’s assertion. A follow-up Open Records request has been made for the City to provide whatever evidence exists to support his claim.