

Tree Conservation Commission
Business Meeting Minutes
City of Atlanta
City Hall
Arborist Division, Suite 3800
Conference Room
April 18, 2018

Commissioners present: John Rains, Katherine Moore, Sarah Boles, Monica Halka, Marvin Lampkin
Staff present: David Zaparanick and Kathy Evans, Arborist Division

- Welcome
- Arborist Division Update. Full staff, with one Arborist on parental leave.
- Nominee for Landscape Architect position. Review resume for Elizabeth Ward.
VOTE: Unanimous support. Appointing to professional position, which has been vacant for 6 months.
- Canopy Update. Date for in-depth presentation to Tree Commission (June business meeting).
- Commissioners hearing concerns about tree loss at Bobby Jones Golf course. Recommend ecological review prior to public projects. This site, however, not subject to City's ordinance because it is under the purview of State of Georgia following land swap.
- Request Accela reports of tree stats. This request is on City's request list.
- Review "Principles for Ordinance Update".
VOTE: unanimous in favor of sending letter signed by Co-Chairs to consultants working on the ordinance.
Discussion of priorities for ordinance changes:
 - Early review of plans, with trees first.
 - Incentives for re-development. Eliminate max/per acre recompense as currently used. Work to provide incentives for re-development rather than development of undisturbed, high quality forests, etc.
 - Eliminate 5-foot rule.
 - Keep it as simple as is practical, with explicit detail.

Guiding Principles for Tree Protection Ordinance Update

Recommendations by City of Atlanta Tree Conservation Commission

1. **New paradigm:** Primary goal should be to maintain a *fully functioning urban forest* with all the associated ecological, environmental, and economic benefits, not simply “more trees”. The benefits of a thriving forest is greater than the sum of its parts. While individual urban trees are important for softening the urban landscape, shading hardscapes, and slowing storm water, forests provide greater ecosystem benefits such as watershed and riparian protection, habitat for native wildlife and migratory birds, heat island reduction, and opportunities for human recreation and renewal. Much of the urban forest is made up of contiguous private properties with mature trees.
2. **Preservation first, replacement second.** Some trees and forest communities cannot be replaced – or recreated – in our lifetimes, if ever.
3. **Adapt the plan to the site, not the site to the plan.** Build around trees when possible, make it a priority to build around the highest quality trees.
4. **Brownfields before green fields.** Re-development before development. Previously developed sites should be developed before more pristine (less disturbed) sites. Even on small lots where houses are demolished, new structures should utilize the footprint of previous structures where feasible. Driveways should always be reused where feasible.
5. **It's not about the trees.** (It's about the forest and ecological health). In the Piedmont region (which is nearly 100% forested in its natural state), trees are markers for intact ecological systems.
6. **Trees are not forests** (Or, trees need friends).
 - Communities of trees provide more ecosystem services than isolated trees.
 - Forests (and stands of trees) are more self-sustaining than isolated individual trees.
 - Large trees typically provide many more ecosystem services than small trees (mature size is determined by age and species, of course).
7. **Not all trees are the same.** (You must know what you've got to know how to manage it).
 - It should be easier to remove a tree with low ecological value in our specific area (e.g. crape myrtle or cryptomeria) than one with high ecological value (e.g. white oak or hickory).
 - It is more important to avoid destruction of a quality tree or stand of trees (e.g. a stand of hickories and oaks are more important to protect than a Burford holly or Japanese maple).
 - Plant the best trees in the best conditions. Also, don't plant lower quality trees in high quality conditions.
 - Parking lot species should be different from trees in parks and yards with more space and greater soil volume.
 - Quality matters. When trees must be removed, replace them with trees of equal or better quality (in terms of ecosystem services).
8. **Dirt matters.** It's about soil volume and quality.
 - Leave enough space for trees to mature.
 - If there's not enough space for the tree on a given site, create a means of saving space elsewhere that supports high quality trees and forests (e.g. conservation easements, nature preserves, open space requirements within developments, linear planting strips, and other innovations that can be used to increase ecological benefits in all land use areas).
 - Leave soil undisturbed when possible, even if not doing so to protect a tree.
9. **Tree removal should not be (only) transactional.**
 - Plan preparation (and review) should be modeled around the need to justify removal, not the need to justify preservation. (When trees are removed, have a good reason).
 - Collect recompense as a last resort. Recompense should never be first option.
 - Fines should be used to incentivize compliance with tree protection, and never as a “cost-of-doing-business” that could incentive destruction of trees by not following tree protection plans during construction.

10. **Trees are community assets.** Trees/forests are not just personal assets but are environmental, ecological, and cultural assets.
11. **Guiding questions.** When considering a change to the ordinance, always consider whether the change is for the benefit of the urban forest? If not, why not? Is the provision necessary? Is the change the most efficient and cost effective for achieving the goal?
12. **Keep it simple.** Whenever possible, make requirements simple and easy to follow – from the beginning of all projects.

Specific issues

1. **Pre-review of plans.** Early review of plans, along with clear rules about what must be saved, helps developers as well as giving better results. Also provides an opportunity to evaluate appeals earlier so that plans are not delayed. Prevents profit loss associated with investing in plans that will later require significant changes. Preliminary review (and early public notice) of tree impact is especially important for public projects (parks, schools, other large projects) with substantial tree removal.
2. **Subdivisions should require optimal tree saving.** Establish buildable lot areas at the subdivision phase to optimize tree savings and require payment for any trees that will necessarily be removed when lots are built out (rather than passing on cost of tree removal to individual builders or homeowners). This allows better planning of lot lines, taking tree saving into consideration.
3. **Earlier appeal.** Appeal opportunity needs to be earlier (e.g. immediately after approvals associated with pre-review). Any disagreement could be appealed immediately.
4. **Establish minimum building footprint and other minimums.** Designate minimum building footprint, not just maximum. Maximums have become the minimums. For example, current maximum lot coverages are allowed even if very high quality trees are destroyed. With a range (eg “alternative maximum lot coverage” or “green infrastructure lot coverage limit”), protection of the highest quality trees would be required as long as a minimum lot coverage was allowed. Simplifies plan preparation and plan review. Same for parking spaces (e.g. applicant must save high quality trees if a minimum number of parking spaces is reached, but not necessarily if seeking spaces beyond the minimum). This helps reconcile differences in zoning and tree codes and provides guidance for addressing in a standard manner.
5. **Specimen trees/high quality trees.** The ordinance requires identification of specimen trees, but it offers no protections. These trees (and ideally other “high quality trees” defined by species) need protection. For example: no specimen tree shall be approved for removal under a landscape plan; no specimen tree shall be removed for storm water mitigation purposes; etc.
6. **Storm water.** Provide incentives to retain trees by giving storm water management “credit” for mature overstory trees (USEPA notes that one 25-foot diameter tree captures the first inch of rainfall for 2400 sq ft of impervious surface).
7. **Delete "5-foot" rule.** Not needed, many healthy specimens are permitted this way.
8. **Max recompense.** Per-acre caps don't make sense in most cases. Upside down to provide discount for most pristine properties (at the very least, increase tree save required or \$ for caps).
9. **Stocking.** Minimum “stocking” is forestry term, not for urban settings. Preservation should be based on quality and feasibility. Replanting should be based on soil area/soil volume and potential for canopy to mature.
10. **Plan review.** Evaluate best ways to support tree protection in plan review.
 - Applies to single-family, subdivisions, commercial, and all property uses.
 - Trees should be considered before subdivisions approved (most appropriate placement of property lines rather than standard property lines, for example).
 - Incentives for minimizing tree loss (must obtain variance to justify removal, quicker permitting process by earlier postings, etc.)

A Better Model for Urban Forestry

GA Forestry Commission

EXISTING DEVELOPMENT MODEL

Trees have low priority

Trees as ornament

Individual trees

Small and ornamental trees

Lawn and paving

Tree maintenance

Aesthetics-based design

URBAN FOREST MODEL

Trees have equal priority

Trees as infrastructure

Forest

Large canopy trees

Vegetative ground cover

Forest management

Soil/Ecological-based design

Principles to Improve the Urban Forest

1. Preserve existing trees and forests.
2. Increase space for tree planting.
3. Preserve and improve the quality of the tree-growing environment.
4. Select trees for diversity and suitability.
5. Select efficient planting locations.
6. Manage the urban forest as a continuous resource regardless of ownership boundaries.

Source: [The Georgia Forestry Commission, in its Model Urban Forest Handbook](#), a document created to help communities better understand, preserve, plant, and maintain trees and forests as an important community resource.