

# Urban and Community Forestry in Pennsylvania

## Municipal Tree Commissions

**F**orming a tree commission is one step that a community can take to create and sustain an urban forestry program. The powers and responsibilities of a tree commission are based on state statute and are assumed by local government. By forming and empowering a tree commission, a community can place the responsibility for important community decisions in the hands of unpaid volunteers with designated powers.

Tree commissions are either advisory or administrative and may have various responsibilities, including the following:

- Lessen the involvement of a municipal council for tree-related matters
- Advise community leaders and staff on administering the community forest
- Stimulate and organize tree planting and maintenance
- Develop and implement urban forest inventories, management plans, and ordinances
- Lessen liability by arranging to remove hazardous trees and repair damage caused by trees

- Settle community disputes caused by tree removal, planting, or maintenance

**I**n Pennsylvania, a tree commission created by municipal ordinance as a decision-making body has exclusive control over a community's shade trees. No tree can be planted or removed within the public right-of-way except under the auspices of the tree commission. This includes public trees that may be planted or removed in conjunction with subdivisions or approved development plans. Tree commissions can be given additional power within a municipality by a council, including:

- Control over all public trees such as trees within community parks
- Review and approval of landscaping proposed in development plans

**F**ormation of a tree commission and development of a comprehensive urban forestry program usually take place together. While working with community officials to start a tree commission, citizens also can undertake other aspects of a community tree program, such as fund-raising and developing tree



inventories. A tree commission should reflect the values and standards of the community and should help champion a community forestry effort. The formation and empowerment of a tree commission can be a crucial element in developing broad-based support for community trees and ensuring long-term success and continuance of a community forestry program.

The following steps may be taken in forming a tree commission:

1. Organize interested citizens and informally outline problems and opportunities for a tree commission to address. Identify specific occurrences or situations (such as tree failures, tree removals, pruning, sidewalk damage, or tree planting) that have caused community conflict or liability. Describe benefits that are expected to result from an organized tree program (such as lower community liability, higher

real estate values, more attractive commercial areas, and healthier trees).

2. Contact other communities with tree commissions or other experts, such as the Department of Community Affairs or Penn State Cooperative Extension offices, for advice and support.
3. When ideas and plans are well organized and fairly complete, contact local government leaders and identify a municipal official who is interested in working with the group. It is important to include municipal officials early in any effort to organize a tree commission.
4. Hold informal meetings with concerned citizens and local officials to discuss ideas and plans. Contact the municipal solicitor to discuss how a tree commission can be legally established within a community.
5. Identify and agree upon the powers, authority, and responsibilities of the tree commission, through meetings with municipal council members, officials, and the solicitor.
6. Involve community members through public hearings and other opportunities for public participation and response.

7. Develop or rewrite the ordinance that legally establishes the tree commission and defines its authority and powers.

8. Seek the council's approval of the ordinance at a public hearing.

**M**unicipal ordinances establishing and empowering tree commissions should contain the following sections:

- number of commission members
- experience or expertise required of members
- place of residence
- compensation, if any
- length of terms
- rotation of terms
- vacancies
- duties
  - adjudicate tree-related matters
  - approve permits for tree removal, planting, or pruning
  - review hazardous trees every year
  - provide educational opportunities and materials
  - arrange for tree planting
  - arrange for tree and stump removals
  - oversee pruning and other maintenance

■ power

- advisory or managerial
- trees on public right-of-way or all public property
- landscape plans for street trees or include development sites

**O**rdinances establishing shade tree commissions also can:

- mandate a municipal arborist or forester position
- mandate and outline the creation of a municipal forestry master plan
- outline required standards and guidelines for tree planting and maintenance

**T**ree commissions can have a great impact on a community's appearance and image as well as its public safety and comfort. Commissions help champion and coordinate a comprehensive and expert program to manage and sustain public trees. They provide long-term, stable management for a valuable, long-lived resource. By forming a tree commission in your community, you can help improve the attractiveness of your community and its quality of life and environment.

The Pennsylvania Urban and Community Forestry Program is a cooperative effort of the state Department of Environmental Resources (DER) Bureau of Forestry and Penn State with leadership provided by the Pennsylvania Urban and Community Forestry Council.

For more information, contact the Extension Urban Forestry Program, School of Forest Resources. The Pennsylvania State University, 108 Ferguson, University Park, PA 16802; (814) 863-7941.

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