The Tree Ordinance: An Essential Community Tree Management Tool

A well-designed and well-written tree ordinance is an essential tool for community tree management program directors. An effective tree ordinance will reflect community values by guiding the actions of government staff, citizens, businesses, builders, and developers toward the achievement of community tree management goals. These goals might include maintaining a minimum amount of tree canopy cover, maximizing the environmental, economic, and social benefits of trees, increasing tree species diversity for maintaining forest health, or protecting special groups of high value trees such as landmark or historic trees.

Public and Private Property

Public property tree ordinances usually require the protection of trees along public street rights-of-ways and other public property. They regulate the types of trees that can be planted and define the appropriate places to plant trees to avoid future conflicts with infrastructure. Often they include the establishment of a community tree board to advise public officials on tree management issues. A private property tree ordinance regulates the conservation, protection, and replacement of trees on private property. Most often these private properties are new development sites but also can be existing commercial sites and established residential lots. A comprehensive community tree management ordinance will apply to both publicly and privately owned property/trees and usually include all of the elements described above.

Sometimes is can be difficult to tell who owns a tree; A good community tree management program will help residents establish tree ownership.

Tree Management Standards

An essential part of any tree ordinance, whether it addresses public or private property, is the adoption of standards for tree care. Adherence to basic standards for tree conservation, tree protection, tree and site selection, soil quality, planting, mulching, fertilization, irrigation, pruning, and any other tree care activity will result in better tree survival and growth, improved tree health, reduced long-term tree maintenance and replacement costs, and greater benefits to be enjoyed by the community as a whole. Professional standards have been developed by the arboricultural community and adopted by the American National Standards Institute for many tree care operations, including tree pruning, planting, fertilization, tree support systems (cabling and bracing), and lightning protection systems. More information on these standards can be found on the International Society of Arboriculture website at www.isa-arbor.com.

Tree Ordinance Enforcement

For any tree ordinance to be effective it must not only be well-designed and well-written, it must be enforced. Consistent enforcement demands substantial time from a community forester, arborist, or code compliance officer who must constantly monitor the activities that take place around public trees and regularly inspect development sites for compliance with ordinance requirements.

Partners in Tree Management

Successful community tree management does not depend solely on the adoption and enforcement of a comprehensive community tree management ordinance, and government employees are not solely responsible for maintaining a healthy community forest. Many community partners, including residents, business owners, non-governmental agencies, and even visitors to a community can contribute greatly to the success of the community's tree management program. When provided with information on the benefits and value of trees, the community's tree management goals, tree ordinance requirements, and basic tree care and protection techniques, all tree care partners can work together to create a healthy and beautiful community forest.

Businesses, community groups, individual residents, and elected officials are all needed to create successful community tree management partnerships.

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