

# MUNICIPAL/UTILITY SYNERGY <sup>1</sup>

by Norman L. Lacasse

The Municipal Tree Restoration Program (MTRP) in Pennsylvania has provided a unique opportunity for electric utilities, the School of Forest Resources at Penn State University and the state Bureau of Forestry to develop comprehensive tree care programs in communities across the Commonwealth. The program was initiated in 1986 with a grant from one electric utility which enabled the cross training of Bureau service foresters and utility foresters to provide urban forestry services to communities, provide tree-related workshops for community leaders and provide compatible trees for research plantings under its electric conductors.

Subsequently, other utilities have joined this research program and have provided financial and physical support. Grants from the US Forest Service, State and Private Forestry unit have further strengthened the program materially. Without the initial support from the electric utility industry, it is doubtful that this program would have been possible. It showed strong support and commitment to solving a very serious problem for the utilities, i.e. the planting of inappropriate tree species under electric conductors by communities and the general public.

MTRP's primary goal was, and remains, to help communities develop comprehensive tree care programs. Prior to the establishment of this program the Bureau struggled to get a delivery system in place to provide urban and community forestry services. With the many demands on the service foresters' time and lack of expertise in urban forestry, it was difficult to get a meaningful program underway. Likewise, Dr. Henry Gerhold, Professor of Forest Genetics at the Penn State University's School of Forest Resources, was very much interested in initiating a tree cultivar testing program but lacked the necessary funding and personnel to undertake such an ambitious

project. The utility company, which provided the initial funding, had over 30 years experience in planting compatible trees under electric conductors but were stymied in their effort to make the transition from small scale demonstrational to large scale operational because of the public's perception of the electric utilities' motivation. The needs of these partners set the stage for the success of MTRP.

The silent partners and principal beneficiaries of this program are the communities of Pennsylvania and other states such as Maryland and New York where MTRP is also being implemented. Originally, some projects began with a complaint from a community to the electric utility about the way trees are trimmed. The complaint triggered a response with information about MTRP and a formal slide presentation by a service forester or a utility forester to borough council, the township supervisors or the shade tree commission. Whenever possible council members and shade tree commissioners are invited to attend a two-day workshop on urban forestry where tree selection, planting and care, along with many other topics, are covered. The project culminates with a test planting of 50 free trees planted under electric conductors and the removal of declining trees. The most important results are an appreciation on the part of the community for the electric service to its customers, trees that are better suited for the planting site in question and a better informed community with regards to tree selection and care. What began as an adversary situation ends up in a cordial relationship.

MTRP is not a program that advocates the removal of all big trees under electric conductors. Clearly there are situations where other techniques can be utilized to resolve the conflict between large trees and electric conductors. Planting appropriate trees is one solution. However, trees

1. Presented at the annual conference of the International Society of Arboriculture in Philadelphia in August of 1991.

that do not have to be trimmed repeatedly will be healthier than those which require cyclic maintenance. Public safety and reliable electric service are only two parts of many considerations. Various options are covered in MTRP workshops.

During the five years since MTRP was started, it has grown amazingly fast and we to date: 1) held 18 workshops where 561 community officials, shade tree commissioners, municipal arborists, service foresters, utility foresters and others have been taught basic urban forestry skills and how to apply them; 2) planted 1750 compatible trees of 23 cultivars in 35 research plantings in 32 communities in Pennsylvania, Maryland and New York; 3) received contributions or pledges of \$720,341 to Penn State University from Penelec, Metropolitan Edison, Baltimore Gas and Electric, Penn Power, West Penn Power, Pennsylvania Power and Light, Duquesne Light Company, Philadelphia Electric and the U.S. Forest Service through the Bureau of Forestry; 4) received an official project status and funding through the Pennsylvania Electric Energy Research Council to Penn State University for a three year period; and 5) recently received contributing support or pledges from Hazelett Tree Service,

ACRT, Asplundh, Davey Tree Company, Bartlett Tree Company, and Environmental Consultants, Inc.

The most recent benefit that has resulted from Pennsylvania's municipal/utility synergy has been the "running start" operational advantage which MTRP has provided in getting our America the Beautiful program under way. The MTRP steering committee was instrumental in finding appropriate representation for Pennsylvania's Urban and Community Forestry Council which met federal guidelines. The Council was then able to immediately move forward with a plan for implementation.

Under the direction of Penn State University and through the guidance of the MTRP Steering Committee, MTRP has met with amazing success due to the mutual cooperation and contributions of our communities and the electric utilities—municipal/utility synergy.

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