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ARBORIST CERTIFICATION VS. LICENSING¹

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If we carefully examine the history of man and nature, we discover all things are governed by laws; Nature's processes are governed by natural laws; the function of governments by legislative laws; and the behavior of individuals by ethics and morals.

I suspect most of us would agree that our legislative laws are as ineffective in dealing with our morals and ethics as they most certainly are in dealing with the laws of nature.

Those of us committed to arboriculture have accepted responsibilities such as the preservation of trees and the hopeful perpetuation of our environment. We should also accept the responsibility to establish laws or certification processes that are effective and give our profession more credibility. We must be aware when establishing these systems that they must be designed to work with imperfect components, as man himself is not perfect — nor has he shown any inclination towards perfection.

Our discussion is to deal with arborist licensing versus certification. Let's take these two systems and briefly define and discuss each one.

Licensing. The term license implies a formal permission or authorization by law. The reasons stated by most governing bodies for the formation of a license is for consumer protection. In today's world, many consumers or, if you will, taxpayers, look at the politicians reasons with a jaundiced eye. That is to say, are they really looking out for the man in the street or are they trying to establish another bureau or office to put more people on the payroll as a further burden to the taxpayer. Most states that have, or have had, such laws will admit that they do not sustain themselves through monies derived from the licensee. I do not mean to imply that this could not be a self-sustaining system. I am sure it could be if handled efficiently.

The fact that it would be a law would probably mean that any arborist within the realm of this law must obtain a license. The process would logically

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require passing a test to demonstrate competency. A fee for the test as well as for the subsequent license would be expected and a renewal on an annual basis would also be expected.

Certification. The certification process is similar to licensing however it is generally implied and meant to be a voluntary process. When properly handled it becomes universal enough so that most within the profession seek it out. Beyond this it should be hoped that the consumer desires the service of only those who have gone through the certification process. Certification is usually handled through professional groups, not government systems.

Discussion

A few years ago I was asked to be a member of the Illinois Tree Expert Act examining board, which I reluctantly accepted as I had never been a strong advocate of the law. My reasons for accepting were that I felt the law was here to stay and I had, on several occasions, openly criticized certain aspects of the test procedures as well as the law itself. I felt that perhaps this would be an opportunity to gain better knowledge of the inner workings of state bureaucracy so that I could in some way help to improve the system.

The examining board consisted of 2 practicing arborists with a minimum of 10 years experience, a plant pathologist, an entomologist and a state employee involved with arboriculture. It was responsible for implementing the tests given on a twice-a-year basis. This has given me a better than average insight into these procedures. As I am sure most of you know, the State of Illinois dropped this law in 1983.

The Illinois Department of Registration and Education governed this process. Let me briefly explain the workings of the Illinois system as I saw it. A few months prior to the examination, an applicant was required to submit a document stating his desire for testing, plus a past history of himself. These were reviewed by the examining board several weeks prior to the exam. The exam had no provision for field testing, it was all done in a classroom situation.

The test had 5 components and each of the 5 were graded on their own. Should a person pass

all but 1 part, he needn't go through the entire exam the next time around — only the part he did not pass. The component parts were: (1) Tree Identification, (2) Tree Growth and Physiology, (3) Plant pathology, (4) Entomology, and (5) Basic Tree Care. All questions were answered by multiple choice. The standard passing grade of 75 was required.

Most of the 5 parts of the test had 50 questions which were drawn from a pool of about 150 questions in each test category. The question selection was done at random by a secretary of the Department. The reason for this procedure was so that the members of the examining board did not know until the day of the test which questions were to be used. This is an excellent system and should be used universally.

The entire test took an average of 5 hours. It was interesting to observe how few applicants were truly prepared to take the test. Seldom did more than 50% pass the entire exam which, in my opinion, was designed to demonstrate no more than minimum competency. I do not mean to imply that this was a difficult exam, I rather feel that too many of those that took it were not properly prepared; perhaps due to indifference or an unfounded belief in their own abilities.

In Illinois the law states that "if an individual holds a college degree from an accredited school of forestry, approved by the Department, such an individual shall be licensed without exam." I feel this was improper and should not be an exclusion in licensing or certification.

Those required to take this test were owners, sales and diagnostic personnel and a more nebulous category "supervisors". I suspect that while this law was in effect, a case could have been made by the state against almost any Illinois tree firm with more than 4 or 5 employees on this "supervisor" point. Most Illinois commercial arborists made sure the principal in the business had a license and let it go at that. Very little State enforcement was done and on those occasions of which I was aware, when a malpractice situation was presented to the Department, the investigative officers showed little concern. The examining board was not, by law, to be involved in the investigative process.

Let's briefly check out the Certification process

and then discuss the relative merits of each system.

The Certification process, as we have discussed, would be on a voluntary basis; however, it should have enough industry backing to enable the municipal arborist, the utility companies and so on to make sure this is a worthwhile requirement in prequalifying a bidder. The arborist must show proof of adequate insurance and in certain cases, bonding; a college degree in related fields or 5 years of practical experience under a certified or licensed arborist; and adherence to a code of ethics. These situations vary a great deal. The Penn-Del Chapter certification system requires only two full years of consecutive experience. Some of these systems have set up a Grandfather Clause which states that those in the business for ten years or more prior to the implementation of the program shall be licensed or certified without examination and upon payment of the annual fee.

If this is to be part of your program I suggest you consider some method of weeding out those companies that may be eligible through the "Grandfather Clause" but are of a questionable status ethically or in any other manner. Perhaps letters of recommendation from competitors or others knowledgeable in the industry.

The certification testing procedure could be copied or modeled after any number of existing tests used by other Chapters or states. It is not sensible for each group to re-invent the wheel. The ISA has a fine Code of Ethics. The NAA has the pruning and cabling and bracing standards. The National Standards Institute, through our industry cooperation, has the Z 133 Safety Standards. Using these as a base, any certification program could be well on its way.

Some of the certification programs in existence today require written, oral and fieldwork as part of the examination. I have some problems with this. I know a number of competent people in our industry that have no desire to climb a tree — yet their diagnostic abilities are marvelous. I say we should let the individual companies or municipalities deal with this situation and train and test their own tree climbers.

It is my hope that one day we will have a basic

standard program for certification using the ISA as an umbrella to establish basic guides. Each Chapter or state would obviously have to rely upon its own group to set up the entomology and plant pathology parts of their exam. Our state extension people should be the ones to turn to in this effort. Set your fees at an equitable level, but high enough to support the system. Be sure the people on your board are protected in case of legal action which could occur. A rotating board with 4 to 6 year tenures should be promoted. The board members should be covered for their expenses, but not necessarily paid in my opinion.

I strongly feel that certification is the best way for our industry to go. As stated before, certification is strictly a voluntary process. There will always be a few competent individuals that see no need for it. I feel their numbers will be so small as to have no significant impact. Those of us that go forward with the process should go out of our way to see that "Certified Arborist" is in our advertising, in the yellow pages, on our business cards, etc. We should back it and we should promote it in the industry, but also tell the world of this. The consumer should be made aware that there are those concerned enough about our industry to take a test to demonstrate competency. Our public relations should be much greater than it is and the certification program is one way to tell the public more about ourselves.

Should you in Wisconsin, or any other state, proceed with this certification system, you must let the public know about it. Sure, it helps our individual ego to pass such a test, but it really doesn't help the industry unless we tell the consumer. If it is to have real affect and value, we should improve our public relations and tell the consumer we are concerned — we are professionals.

The trees will be better off — the consumer will be better off, and so will we.

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