

# POLITICAL & ADMINISTRATIVE FACTORS IN URBAN-FORESTRY PROGRAMS

by Curtis Johnson

**Abstract.** This article summarizes a 12-city case study<sup>1</sup> done for the USDA Forest Service by the Syracuse Research Corporation on political and administrative factors and processes in urban-forestry programs. Findings and recommendations on organization, activities, communication and information networks, and the political and policy environment surrounding urban-forestry programs are characterized.

Urban-forestry programs in 12 cities in the U.S. were recently analyzed from a political science approach that emphasized political and policy decision processes. The 12 were Atlanta, GA; Baltimore, MD; Boise, ID; Carmel, CA; Charlotte, NC; Chicago, IL; Dayton, OH; Denver, CO; Ft. Lauderdale, FL; Newark, NJ; New Orleans, LA; and Seattle, WA. These cities represent six geographic regions and a wide range of population size and density, are experiencing population decline, and are governed by a mayor-council or a council-manager.

Study information was obtained by a personal interview with the forester administering the urban-forestry program in each city. Four dimensions were explored: program organization and staff; program activities and evaluation, communication and use of information, and policy environment. Program comparisons were made in 1) policy environment relating to demographic and economic conditions of the cities; 2) policy decisions with respect to the program's history, institutional setting, and activities (information flow and inter-governmental interactions); and 3) political forces shaping decisions (issues and interest/pressure groups).

## Findings and Recommendations

**Policy environment.** Policy environments among the 12 urban-forestry programs varied especially as to organization and management.

Differences are the rule, rather than similarities with respect to social, economic and physical conditions. The policy environment around urban-forestry programs can be enhanced, while maintaining an autonomous nature, by improving the decision-making and management functions. High standards should be held for goal establishment, efficient operations, and evaluation procedures. A key element for strong urban-forestry programs appears to be the existence (or at least the perception) of a "crisis" in the urban forest, such as the Dutch elm disease in some cities. When a crisis is believed to exist, the mobilization of funds, community support, assistance, and greater commitment are more frequently stimulated than when the goal of the program is maintenance. Therefore, it is essential that urban-forestry programs improve their capacities to forecast and identify deteriorating conditions so that action can be taken to deal with nascent crises before they reach the stage where little can be done, or when effective actions are cost prohibitive.

**Institutional setting.** The 12 programs varied considerably with respect to organizational location, scope of responsibility, manpower resources, and the use of outside contractors. An urban-forestry function within the parks and recreation department of a city appeared to be more compatible with the goals of the program. Those agencies located in public works and similar service departments, however, have more resources. In most cases, it does not appear bureaucratically feasible to establish an autonomous urban-forestry agency, although there are some successful operations which are structured. Such an agency will likely lack adequate organizational and political support to ac-

<sup>1</sup>"Urban Forestry Programs: Analysis and Recommendations" by Michael K. O'Leary, Donald J. McMaster, and William D. Coplin, 1980, Syracuse Research Corporation. Study done under Contract 42-294 between the Northeastern Forest Experiment Station, USDA Forest Service, and the Research Foundation of the State University of New York, Syracuse, New York. Supported by the Pinchot Institute of Conservation Studies, USDA Forest Service, Milford, Pennsylvania.

quire necessary resources. Urban-forestry programs appear most viable when located in a public works-related agency.

Most of the programs had control over the bulk of the urban forest in their metropolitan area, although in a few cases jurisdiction was divided, necessitating coordination among agencies. It appeared that the scope of responsibility should be kept centralized as much as possible to reduce the time-consuming and inefficient coordination that is required under divided responsibility.

The size of the professional staff and the degree to which non-professional staff is drawn from other city departments varied and does not seem to be related to the performance of a program. In terms of goals accomplished, some of the stronger programs are managed and staffed by one person who has no employees under his control; by contrast some weaker ones have large professional and non-professional staffs. It was suggested that any urban-forestry program have at least one well-trained professional with a background in urban-forestry systems. Other than this, flexible manpower policies should be encouraged by management. Outside contractors are an important resource for a number of urban-forestry programs. The extent (or even possibility) of outside contracting is sometimes dictated by past experience with contractors, administrative constraints, political factors, and budgetary concerns. In other instances, the use of outside contractors is based on careful benefit-cost calculations.

**Program Activities.** The staffs of urban-forestry programs are primarily occupied with day-to-day operational activities, particularly tree planting and tree removal. They are less concerned with those traits often associated with public programs generally such as gathering information, systematic evaluation, staff training and organizational development. The reasons for this include the overwhelming day-to-day problems which often touch upon the survival of large parts of an entire urban-forestry program, and the lack of adequate resources to devote to modern management and decision-making practices. Urban-forestry programs should develop standards involving increased management and decision-making capabilities, obtain sufficient time and

fiscal resources to meet this goal, and implement extensive training and development programs.

Urban foresters seem satisfied with their access to technical information. However, they cited a wide variety of sources of information and emphasized the importance of exchanging information on a person-to-person basis. Some did note that it was difficult to find one source that focused specifically on urban problems, especially the applicability of forest technology in the urban environment. Urban foresters generally are ahead of information sources in recognizing the general problems associated with the concept of managing the vegetation component of the urban natural-resource system.

The emphasis on face-to-face-communications and the absence of publications dealing exclusively and comprehensively with urban-forestry suggest a need for improvement in exchanging information among practitioners and transmitting information from research programs. Such exchanges should take the form of professional associations, newsletters, meeting, and other media. The emphasis should be on contributions from working urban foresters reporting on how well technical procedures actually work when applied in urban-forest settings.

**Political Environment.** Most urban-forestry programs surveyed were underfunded. The primary reason for this is the lack of adequate political constituencies to support them. Policies should be pursued to identify and develop individuals and groups within the community to support increased budgetary allocations.

In most cases federal and state forest services provided little political and organizational support at individual municipal levels required to develop strong urban-forestry programs. They did provide some information and coordination services. Program support by the USDA Forest Service should include many of the specific steps already suggested, such as technical assistance. It should initiate a policy of helping other federal agencies such as the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Energy, and Transportation, to establish criteria for urban-forestry aspects of their urban-oriented programs. The USDA Forest Service should provide assistance in the form of policy initiatives, technical information, and finan-

cial resources. A major consideration in such assistance is the way it is administered, specifically, whether it goes directly to cities or continues to go through state agencies for redistribution. Some State-forestry organizations are very aggressive in promulgating urban-forestry programs. However, in cases where they are not interested in developing and administering adequate programs, the USDA Forest Service should consider exercising its prerogative of collaborating directly with interested cities. For the most part, urban foresters react in response to direct forestry and political needs. They have not developed coherent strategies to build support for their programs. They need to be provided with more information and other support to enhance their role as administrators in a political environment.

### Conclusions

A main theme that cuts across the programs examined is the importance of the urban political and social environment in shaping program policies and operations and defining their needs. The dominant feature of this environment is the tight fiscal conditions confronting most cities. These are not likely to go away and may, in fact, worsen, in the future. Programs must compete for a share of the city budget, in some cases where the urban fiscal resource base is declining and in others where the budget has not increased proportionately with increased demands for local government services. Whether the situation is that of an older city experiencing a population drain or a relatively young, rapid-growth city, the outcomes are similar; local decision-makers see other problems as more urgent and important than urban-forestry. Moreover, the impact of these problems, both socially and politically, are much more direct and palpable than the impact of the urban forest. It has been said that when people think of posterity, they plant a tree, but when politicians think of reelection, they pave the streets. In short, the services which have the most widespread and immediate impact or which affect the most influential constituencies are given priority.

The situation is not so dismal that we should anticipate terminations of programs, although shut-downs of urban-forestry operations are not without precedent. However, curtailment of

urban-forestry operations may be a real threat; more than one of the foresters interviewed foresaw budget cutbacks in their programs' future. More importantly, the fiscal and political trends are such that they may impede comprehensive management of the urban forests. It is easier to acquire funds for high-impact, highly-visible projects like new initiatives in tree planting than low visibility, more difficult-to-justify activities like tree inventories or evaluation systems. The programs studied have adapted their operations and geared their policies to these realities to a remarkable extent and have been able to integrate some of the policies and practices associates with urban-forestry in the abstract.

The foresters are as aware of how they would like their programs to function as they are of the forces which compel them to function as they do. Their problem is to meld practices and policies with the fiscal and political realities of their setting.

The needs of these programs then are related to obtaining funds for their operations and controlling their costs. A variety of actions can be taken to this end.

First, there is the need for the development of improved skills in linking programs with the total spectrum of public needs in the urban environment. This implies a more wide-ranging search for the benefits (especially measurable benefits, such as climate moderation, and tangible benefits, such as socio-economic impacts) of properly managed forests. This also suggests more highly developed skills of public outreach and involvement in proposed and ongoing urban-forestry programs. In this way, the salience of the issues surrounding urban-forestry might be moved up the scale of urban priorities. And urban-foresters need to be better trained in the politics of policymaking. They must become effective advocates both in the quiet councils of government and in the more public forums that affect policy decisions. If they do, they will help promote urban-forestry as an integral part of serious urban action.

Second, the foresters need increased contact with one another, in view of the existence of an immense amount of technical data about urban forest management. In the near unanimous judgment of the urban foresters interviewed, much of this existing information has uncertain relevance

for the urban setting. The practical experience of each program is all too rarely shared with others. Therefore, one needed action is the establishment of formal and informal networks by which urban foresters can share with one another information on practices that work well and work poorly. Such an added dimension to available technical in-

formation would greatly enhance the practice of urban-forestry in America today.

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## ABSTRACTS

NIELSON, D.G. 1981. **Alternate strategy for arborists — treat the tree, not the customer.** *Weeds, Trees & Turf* 20(7): 40-42.

I am issuing a challenge to change. My perspective is based on eight years of home ownership and studying insects on trees and shrubs since 1968. Although I'm not a practicing arborist responsible for managing a business operation that must turn a profit, I am a consulting entomologist and have become intimately acquainted during the past several years with arboricultural practices and problems. This article is intended to provide food for thought. It is not intended to criticize current practices or to suggest there is only one way to think about or implement pest control as part of an arboricultural service. In this article, I will suggest a strategy for tree care that you may not have considered and your clients may not be ready to accept. However, client acceptance is part of the challenge.

SMITH, E.M. 1981. **Fertilizing Malus 'Snowdrift' in the landscape.** *Arboric. Journal* 5: 137-142.

Many, if not the majority of, trees including flowering crabapples planted around newly constructed residences and commercial buildings are located in soils which are less than desirable for plant growth. Trees in the landscape must be fertilized regularly to survive in the poor soils. Also, well fertilized trees will be more resistant to insect and disease problems and more tolerant of winter conditions. The objectives of this research were to evaluate the growth of *Malus* 'Snowdrift' in sites similar to many home landscapes, as a function of four nitrogen levels and two methods of placement. Nearly all nitrogen treatments resulted in trunk caliper and diameter of branch spread increases, with 6 lb N/1000 sq ft treatments every three years the most effective. Significant growth increases were observed from drilled-hole treatments without fertilizer after six years but this difference was not apparent after nine years. The growth of *Malus* 'Snowdrift' was not affected by fertilizer placement over a nine year period.