

CONTRACTING MUNICIPAL TREE MAINTENANCE¹

by Robert W. Kennedy

Abstract. The City of Los Angeles, with an urban forest of 680,000 trees, has found that developing a partnership with private industry has provided its citizens with a cost effective and flexible tool to provide a high level of quality service. To make this partnership work definitive specifications and contracts must be prepared, executed and enforced. City staff provides support to and inspection of the contractor to ensure that the specified quality and level of service is achieved.

Résumé. La ville de Los Angeles, avec une forêt urbaine de 680,000 arbres, a constaté que le développement de la collaboration avec l'industrie privée a fourni à ses citoyens un outil de coût efficace et flexible pour pourvoir à une qualité élevée de service. Pour que cette collaboration puisse fonctionner, des spécifications et des contrats définis doivent être rédigés, exécutés et respectés. Le personnel de la ville fournit le support et l'inspection du travail du contracteur afin de s'assurer que la qualité spécifiée et le niveau de service désiré est atteint.

With an estimated 680,000 street trees planted on over 7,600 miles of streets, the City of Los Angeles has one of the largest urban forests in the country.

Street trees in the City of Los Angeles are maintained by the City's Department of Public Works, Bureau of Street Maintenance, Street Tree Division. In fiscal year 89/90, the Division's total budget of \$15.9 million included \$6.2 million for the contracting of street tree maintenance services. A total of 44 contracts for broadhead tree trimming, palm tree trimming and tree stump removal services were awarded to 10 different contractors during the 1989/90. The majority of the contracts were for broadhead tree trimming and ranged in size from approximately 500 to 3,500 trees each, with a total of approximately 60,000 trees trimmed by contract during the year.

The Street Tree Division's contracts are administered by Division staff including contract development and preparation, notifying interested bidders, conducting pre-bid and job start meetings, inspecting contractor's work, issuing change orders or supplemental agreements and preparing payment documents. The awarding of a contract is accomplished through a joint recom-

mendation by the Bureaus of Street Maintenance and Contract Administration to the City's Board of Public Works. The Bureau of Contract Administration monitors adherence to the City's Affirmative Action Program and the MBE/WBE Outreach Program subcontracted for contracts estimated to cost over \$100,000.

In overseeing street tree care for the City, many considerations must be taken into account. The City of Los Angeles, which encompasses 465 square miles, is basically a desert where weather and climate patterns can vary significantly between the coastal, rural mountain, wide suburban valley and densely populated inner-city areas. It has also been found that the level of community interest and commitment in preserving street trees can vary from intense concern to willful vandalism. Additional factors to be considered are the maturity of the trees in a particular area, their general health and suitability for that area, and planting strip conditions which range from poor to ideal.

Funds for contractual tree maintenance services have increased over the last few years. This was due in part to the benefits realized by accomplishing street tree maintenance through the combined use of the city crews and private contractors.

Generally, contracting street maintenance services in the City of Los Angeles was begun in reaction to increases in liability cases, inability of the City's forces to adequately keep up with the demands for tree trimming, and the rapidly growing public awareness of the role trees play in the environment. As a result, beginning in 1985 the Mayor and City Council began to provide additional funding for both contractual and force account trimming which resulted in a reduction of the trimming frequency from 16.5 to six years. However, even prior to contracting for services, Street Division operations had been changing considerably over a number of years.

1. Presented at the annual conference of the International Society of Arboriculture in Toronto, Ontario in August 1990.

History

The Street Tree Division, formerly the Division of Forestry of the Department of Parks, was created by Ordinance in 1930. This Ordinance was included in the Los Angeles Municipal Code in 1936 and, except for minor changes, is in effect today. While the Sections of the Code which govern street tree planting and maintenance were comprehensive enough to give the City the necessary authority for the administration of a street tree program; proper personnel and equipment, together with the required financing, were not provided for many years.

Prior to 1931, no tree services were offered. All tree planting, pruning, and removal was done by the abutting property owner. Permits for this work were issued to citizens, and as funds were made available by the Park Department, some limited tree pruning and removal work was provided on major streets and/or state highways.

In the period 1933 to 1935, approximately 12,000 trees were trimmed and a survey which resulted in a Master Tree Plan was sponsored by the Public Works Administration. During this period State gas tax funds were provided for tree work on major streets and state highways, and the first two regularly employed tree trimming crews were hired.

In 1940, a policy of trimming trees to provide clearance for public utilities was adopted by the Board of Park Commissioners. This expansion of service was financed by billings to the particular utility for which the service was provided.

On July 1, 1955, the jurisdiction over street trees was transferred to the Board of Public Works, of which the Bureau of Street Maintenance is part, by an amendment to the City Charter. At that time, a major portion of the services was financed either by the State gas tax contributions, by public utilities through billings for utility clearance services performed, or through special assessments for the maintenance of landscaped areas.

Since that time, the major challenge has been to develop and implement innovative alternatives and strategies to maximize productivity and efficiency in order to meet continually increasing service demands and the enormous variety of tree-related problems handled by City crews.

The scope of ongoing activities provided by the 270 employees of the Street Tree Division in managing a large and diverse urban forest is varied. Serving as the coordinating focal point for such a variety of activities makes it necessary for the Division to continually develop and assess effective methods of operation and organization that best utilize existing resources.

One such innovation, involving a shift in the early 1980's to large nine-member grid (or programmed) crew operations, increased tree trimming efficiency and production. Traditionally, small three-member demand (or regular) crews had been utilized to respond to requests for service. These demand crews operated by being dispatched to a specific address to trim one or two trees. Although emergencies and prioritized service requests are ideally handled in this manner, the travel time between work locations and the additional job site preparation time required makes demand trimming less practical for day-to-day trimming work. Grid tree trimming, however, functions in a "mass production" type of operation very similar to that of our contractors. Because of the great number of uniformly planted trees that are now mature and require trimming, a programmed tree crew can trim hundreds of trees, one after another, in close geographical proximity to each other.

Contracting Tree Trimming Services

Under a major operational reorganization six grid crews were eventually formed by restructuring existing personnel and equipment used by the traditionally functioning demand crews. However, even with this reorganization, we were still unable, as previously stated, to adequately keep up with the demand for trimming. This was the key factor in the decision to supplement City crews with private contractors.

Historically, the Street Tree Division has had difficulty hiring qualified tree trimmers. For the last eight years this problem has worsened. This affected the Division's ability to achieve an acceptable tree trimming frequency using in-house personnel. The only available alternative to reach those goals was the utilization of private contracting.

Another influencing factor was the fact that the

Department of Public Works, of which the Street Tree Division is part, was and is constantly hampered by a lengthy equipment acquisition process. The normal two-year acquisition entails obtaining funding, bidding, evaluating the bids, and negotiating delivery schedules to fit the Division's timetables. Furthermore, the purchasing process is beyond the control of any one operational division or department. This resultant delay, inherent in this process, affected the Division's ability to reach its tree trimming goals, impacted employee morale, and negatively influenced the overall composition of the Division.

Also greatly influencing the decision to use private contractors was a growing concern by citizens regarding the quality of tree trimming. The diversity of the many communities that comprise the City makes it an understandable hardship to satisfy every individual when the goal is to trim the City's 680,000 trees every six-seven years. What constitutes acceptable or unacceptable trimming is in the eyes and environmental philosophy of each individual property owner. What may be considered acceptable to industry professionals, may not be acceptable to the citizens and vice-versa. This issue significantly impaired the efficiency of the Street Tree Division. To ensure that both City forces and contractors provide a quality tree trim, clear, concise guidelines had to be developed which would be used to judge performance and answer critics.

Finally, one of the more significant reasons for using private contractors was that it offered a viable and cost neutral alternative to hiring additional City employees. Contracting offers a maximum flexibility to the municipal arborist who is required to continually compete for scarce and politically allocated dollars. By maintaining a strong municipal work force (force account) to handle emergencies and provide a base level of trimming, contracting can be expanded or reduced to meet the trimming cycle as the funding allocation changes.

A prime example of this occurred during the 90/91 fiscal year budget process. The City Council had to reduce this fiscal year's allocations due to an unexpected revenue short-fall, and in doing so reduced the Division's budget by \$3.2 million. The basis for this decision was the fact that the

Street Tree Division achieved its objective of trimming all 680,000 trees within the projected timetable (the last 6-7 years). Even with this reduction, the Division is not faced with the laying off of any existing City staff. The Division can still maintain a seven-year trimming cycle and respond to emergencies with the remaining contract funding and existing staff through an internal reorganization.

Contracting is a Partnership

The one thing that is truly important in contracting, is developing a partnership with the contractor. Many people believe this to be immaterial. However, our experience has shown this partnership or team approach to be effective. The contractor knows that he or she can rely on the support of the Street Tree Division's management for assistance and/or advice, when needed; and Division staff knows that the contractor will provide competent and quality service to the citizen. This provides a highly economical and cost effective approach to achieving the Division's goals and objectives.

Based on the Street Tree Division's experience to date, tree trimming services administered through contract with private contractors seems best suited to assist in the Division's efforts to reduce the service request backlog and maintain a uniform trimming cycle. Since backlogged request locations can be grouped in contiguous areas of concentrated need, it is more cost-effective for the City to have contractors perform work in an operation similar to City crews operating under a grid (or programmed) system. From all indications, employing private contractors to perform tree trimming services, under a demand system, would prove very costly and inefficient. At the 1984 Street Tree Seminar and International Society of Arboriculture Western Chapter Joint Meeting, two panelists representing private contracting companies both expressed the feeling that it is not appropriate for cities to contract out all tree trimming services and that it would not be as economical for private contractors to provide demand trimming as it would be for them to provide "grid" trimming services. The City of Los Angeles heeded this advice and our enormous improvement in productivity and efficiency has proven the wisdom of this

advice.

However, contracting tree trimming services does not appear to be the simple panacea for saving tax dollars that many believe. Although contract work has specific time and productivity requirements subject to monetary penalty for non-compliance, the Street Tree Division finds itself vulnerable to shifts in private industry cost trends. In some instances, bids were received that sufficiently exceeded cost estimates to cause the rejection of all bids.

Another factor needing careful consideration is the concomitant contract inspection and administration costs incurred by the City for each contract, which add to the City's financial commitment when services are provided through contractors. These costs should never be overlooked or underestimated when considering the cost of contracting.

However, contracting for street trees services does have an appropriate place in municipal operations. Many times, a special purpose project of a time limited nature which would otherwise divert crews and equipment and disrupt normal operations, may be better accomplished through agreements with private contractors. Examples of such projects are urban reforestation in a specific area, special purpose trimming funded by community organizations, and possibly, planting projects in a particular area.

As previously stated, the Street Tree Division currently contracts for tree trimming and removal services. The Division has recently also expanded its contracting operations to include tree planting and turf mowing services.

The Street Tree Division feels it has avoided potential problems often inherent in contracting for several reasons: bid packages provided to interested bidders include detailed specifications for the service requested with complete location listings and expected conduct of operations, a pre-bid meeting is held to assist bidders in the bid process, the contractor to whom a contract has been awarded is required to attend a job-start meeting before beginning work, and the Division's

inspectors and other key staff closely monitor the work of contractors and are always available to them should questions arise.

A few of the aspects of contracting with the City of Los Angeles may appear difficult to first time bidders. These primarily have to do with sufficiently meeting the requirements of programs which the City must adhere to (subcontracting and affirmative action), and understanding the procedures involved between bidding, being awarded a contract, and actually beginning work.

However, the Street Tree Division has found that serious bidders quickly become familiar with the process and soon become successful and reliable bidders and contractors. Additionally, successful bidders will find that the time allowed by the City to complete the various processes is sufficient and the Division's time allowances adequate.

Conclusion

The Street Tree Division believes its contract program to be a successful one. As a supplement to city crews, services provided by private contractors have enabled the Division to: reduce the backlog of requested services, maintain a reasonable trim cycle, reduce the number of claims filed as ability to provide preventive maintenance has increased and thus reduced potential hazards and, most importantly, has virtually completely turned around a previously held perception, by both elected officials and the public, that the City was not properly maintaining its urban forest. I believe contracting has greatly enhanced the overall operations of and services provided by the City to the citizens and property owners of Los Angeles and the Division views contracting as continuing to be an important part of its overall operations.

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