

Urban Forest Improvement Project Norwalk, Connecticut

“This project has taken a natural asset that many in New England take for granted and expanded it into a quality-of-life initiative that will have lasting impacts across our community for decades.”

- Richard Moccia, Mayor of Norwalk



Project Overview

The Urban Forest Improvement Project represents the comprehensive coordination of multiple tree-related projects in the City of Norwalk, Connecticut. Between the years 2000 and 2004, many departments in the City government and several business and community organizations launched or expanded programs relating to urban forestry, tree planting, maintaining public space, and educating students and the public about the value of a healthy and well-maintained urban forest. Leaders in many of these groups realized that their programs would be more effective and their efforts would bear more fruit if they were coordinated. The Norwalk Urban Forest Improvement Project grew from this effort and resulted in the establishment of a strong collaborative team that focuses on reforesting barren sections of the urban forest, improving maintenance and utility trimming efforts, educating citizens on the value of diverse green and open spaces, and beautifying the community.

Project at a Glance

Project Partners: City of Norwalk Tree Advisory Committee, Department of Public Works, Department of Parks and Recreation, Department of Planning and Zoning, Norwalk Redevelopment Agency, Norwalk Tree Alliance, Clean & Green, the Coalition of Norwalk Neighborhood Associations, and the Norwalk Chamber of Commerce

Location: Norwalk, Connecticut

Award Category: Small-city winner

Timeframe: 2004 - 2005
(Ongoing program)

Size and scope: Approximately 106 trees planted on private and public property and 500 saplings distributed to school children

Total cost of project: \$467,300
(2005-2006 budget)

Outstanding Accomplishments

- Integrated and streamlined various pre-existing tree planting programs within the City of Norwalk.
- Promoted appropriate tree trimming by utility companies.
- Established an educational arboretum in a depressed area of South Norwalk.
- Developing a city-wide inventory system and GIS database to guide the Tree Management Plan.
- Trained Neighborhood Tree Liaisons to coordinate tree-related projects in their communities.

Urban Forest Improvement Project - Project Description

Pre-existing Conditions

While Norwalk, like other New England communities, is moderately to heavily forested, it is not consistently canopied. There is a large and attractive forest in the north and the southwest corner of the city, but the tree stock in much of the inner, western and southern sections of the city remains sparse and inundated by invasive species. Given the historic appeal of the harbor to industry and commerce, large areas of land were deforested for factories, offices, shipyards, and other commercial endeavors. Over the past ten or so years there has been renewed and growing interest in residential development in Norwalk, which has led to a greater interest in quality of life issues such as the health and beauty of the urban forest.

Quality of Life: While Norwalk is a diverse city composed of a variety of neighborhoods with unique character, there were general complaints coming from citizens on the quality of their urban environment. Residents in areas that were considered to have significant tree coverage were concerned about the prominence of invasive trees and low quality canopy while residents in more urban neighborhoods were discouraged by the barrenness and lack of trees on their streetscapes.



Project Goals

- Restore trees to barren sections of the City and areas that were once canopied or tree-lined.
- Enhance public understanding and appreciation of the value of trees to the community.
- Increase volunteer participation in tree-related programs.
- Educate youth about the benefits of trees.
- Encourage responsible removal, replanting, and trimming of trees.
- Improve the environment and aesthetic appearance of the City as a whole.

Project Components

The Urban Forest Improvement Project coordinates and streamlines a number of tree-related initiatives:

- The *Tree Planting Program* provides free trees to private residents and coordinates planting projects at the neighborhood and commercial district level. Within the first year of this initiative the City received 200 requests for trees from residents, processed 100 of them, and provided trees to the 35 requests it deemed appropriate. In addition, 40 trees have been planted in neighborhood coordinated projects.
- The *Tree Permitting Program* allows the Urban Forest Improvement Project to control the permits that utility companies need for tree trimming, which promotes appropriate tree pruning around overhead lines. In addition, the program works with residents to remove diseased or hazardous trees and requires tree replacement.
- *Neighborhood Tree Liaisons* are appointed and trained members of the neighborhood associations who attend Tree Advisory Committee meetings, identify locations for planting projects,

create planting plans, report the illegal cutting of trees, and coordinate with utility companies on tree trimming in their communities.

- The *Illegal Tree Cutting* program fines perpetrators who have illegally cut a tree, requires them to pay a replacement fee, and ensures replanting. All fines and replacement fees are reinvested in the tree planting account.

- The *Columbus Magnet School Arboretum* is an educational arboretum in a depressed area of South Norwalk. Twenty-nine tree species have been planted in the arboretum. The City and Norwalk Tree Alliance are working with the school to incorporate the arboretum into the school's curriculum.

- The *Citywide Tree Inventory* systematically locates, measures, assesses, and maps City trees for inclusion in a GIS database that will provide the basis for the Tree Management Plan.

- *Adopt-A-Spot* and *Adopt-A-Street* solicits sponsors to support plantings and maintenance in specific locations around the city.

- *Zoning/Policy Changes* that encourage tree planting and maintenance have been developed with the help of the Department of Planning and Zoning and the Redevelopment Agency. They have led to the expansion and improvement of landscaping requirements for new construction and development.

Outreach: The Project has engaged in a series of marketing activities that include open houses, presentations to community groups, and targeted media exposure to promote the involvement of residents, businesses, and City leaders. Arbor Day activities encourage middle and high school students to get involved with tree planting and mapping activities. A series of other contests, trainings, surveys, and events work to get a broad cross-section of the population involved in the urban forest.

Urban Forest Improvement Project - Benefits



Funding

While a large majority of the time and effort necessary to make this program a success is donated by project partners and other volunteers, the City of Norwalk provides annual capital funds for the purchase and planting of trees and allocates staff to tree-related programs. Trees and saplings are also obtained through donations from local landscape firms and nurseries. Clean & Green, a non-profit project partner, provides funding for the liability insurance for the Adopt-A-Street program.

Environmental Benefits

Canopy Restoration: By increasing the canopy through tree planting, a greater amount of tree coverage is available to reduce the energy needed for heating and cooling buildings. These trees also reduce stormwater runoff as well as carbon dioxide and other forms of air pollutants through retention and sequestration, respectively.

Greenway Connectivity: As part of this project, several bikeways and hiking trails that traverse the urban forest are under development. In addition, the Urban Forest Improvement Project is working with Connecticut Light & Power to create recreation paths along right-of-ways for underground power lines. Currently there is a path planned from the southern tip to the northern limit of the City.

Community and Economic Benefits

Economic Vitality: The planting of street trees on Wall Street, a recovering central commercial district, has improved the attractiveness of this area to shoppers and sparked great interest and renewed participation of merchants in this project.

Access to Green Space for Low Income Residents: All residential development projects currently in progress in the City contain a percentage of affordable housing and need to meet significant landscaping and tree requirements. The Urban Forest Improvement Project has been instrumental in the initiation and support of these City requirements.

Resident Involvement and Satisfaction: As the profile of this project has increased, so has the level of resident involvement. This has generated a sense of ownership and accountability among all participants.

Education: Cultivating knowledge about the value and benefits of trees is one of the primary goals of the Urban Forest Improvement Project. The Project has achieved this by creating an educational arboretum, hosting open houses, participating in presentations at community groups, and providing training to volunteers, including neighborhood tree liaisons.



Urban Forest Improvement Project - Looking Ahead

Project Evaluation

The primary form of evaluation for the Urban Forest Improvement project comprises feedback from residents that have volunteered with or been affected by the projects to date. This allows the project team to evaluate the impact that it is having on the overall quality of life in the neighborhoods in which it has worked. In addition, the Project is in the conceptual stage of developing a system for quantifying the environmental benefits that result from its initiatives.

Project Maintenance

A City ordinance requires that a tree management plan be in place to maintain existing tree plantings and encourage new ones. Due to the widespread support for the Urban Forest Improvement Project in a variety of City departments, there are additional plans, zoning regulations, and permitting programs that support tree planting and maintenance. In addition, a designated community sponsor has accepted responsibility for project maintenance in each specific planting location, ensuring the upkeep of each completed project.

Challenges Faced

The project faced two perception-related obstacles: one was the misguided view that in New England trees are everywhere and there is no need for any extra effort to encourage tree growth. Intensive educational efforts were necessary to overcome this. The second was related to a common belief that individuals and groups could do little to improve the general environment in the City. To change this, the City of Norwalk provided the initial funds necessary to get this project up

and running to a point where the positive results and benefits became visible, thereby encouraging other organizations and citizens to become involved.

Innovation Applied

By coordinating a variety of tree-related programs City-wide, this project continues to transcend the traditional accomplishments of single-location tree programs. This coordination has not only expanded the scope of impacts, it has resulted in increased respect and cooperation within the City government and convinced residents that they can, in fact, improve the quality of life within their community.



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