

Understanding the Challenges of Municipal Tree Planting

By E. Gregory McPherson and Robert Young

Nine of the twelve largest cities in the U.S. have mayoral tree planting initiatives (TPIs), with pledges to plant nearly 20 million trees. Although executive-level support for trees has never been this widespread, many wonder if this support will endure as administrations change and budgets tighten.

In an effort to share lessons learned from successes and setbacks, a workshop was held in Los Angeles, California, to “troubleshoot” the TPI process, recognizing that managing the politics of trees is often more challenging than planting trees. A primary goal in this effort was to create a “Community of Practice” that will provide long-term support for managers of existing and emerging TPIs. The two-day workshop (June 3-4, 2010) brought together 24 individuals representing 20 municipalities who were primarily responsible for managing TPIs. This article summarizes the most important findings from the workshop.

Sustaining Tree Planting Initiatives

Establishing TPIs that will withstand the test of time is a challenge due to constant change. The image of a tree was offered as way to visualize three interrelated components of a TPI that each change in their own way. The leaves correspond to the political realm, coming and going in very visible and impactful ways. Without leaves the tree will die. The trunk corresponds to partners who help support the TPI through their activities. Changes in the network of partners can be subtle and dramatic, with corresponding influences on the health of the initiative. The roots correspond to constituents who provide the resources, energy, and enthusiasm needed to nurture the TPI through good times and bad.

Participants reported that the challenges associated with the political realm include setting realistic goals for the TPI at its outset, advocating policy to fund tree maintenance as well as planting, and strategically addressing administration and personnel changes to ensure continuity of the TPI. They also noted that efforts to sustain solid TPI partners are challenged by the need to avoid “turf wars” for funding, and the necessity of looking beyond street and park trees to the needs of the entire urban forest. Finally, the participants noted the importance of building robust constituencies (especially in low income areas and within the city family), and developing diversified sources of support to sustain large-scale tree planting programs.



Urban greening is one of many initiatives executive management adopts in pursuit of a more sustainable city. Science and research will be critical in developing more accurate and cost-effective tools for recording and tracking trees, mapping tree canopy, and identifying vacant tree planting sites.

Conference participants identified myriad strategies for Mayors to address these challenges:

- adopt more realistic goals by seeking staff input before tree planting targets are set
- position the TPI within the larger goal of municipal sustainability
- direct staff from various departments to support and participate in the TPI
- develop ordinances and guidelines for preserving and protecting healthy existing trees
- advocate for TPI funding from corporate sponsors, as well as non-traditional sources such as transportation, air quality, and public health agencies.

Participants also noted that because the Mayor is the TPI's most visible spokesperson, the message he/she delivers is extremely important. Access to the Mayor and the message is critical to managing the public's regard for any tree planting initiative.

Engaging the Public

Lack of public awareness about TPIs is a challenge. Participants at the Los Angeles conference commented that successfully overcoming this obstacle is complicated by the many types of publics, such as elected officials, professionals/consultants, seniors, youth, disadvantaged, ethnic groups, home owner associations, neighborhoods, business districts, school districts, religious organizations, and scouts who have differing relationships with TPIs and broader agendas of their own. To be effective, TPI managers reported, messaging must be tailored to each market, and this requires more resources than are typically available. Many TPIs have been successful reaching out to a few markets, but, participants noted, few have developed sophisticated programs aimed at a number of targeted audiences. Some examples of successful outreach efforts shared by participants included, in NYC, the iPhone application “Trees Near You,” which provides in-depth information on each of 500,000 street trees. Million Trees LA found that offering fruit trees overcame resistance to tree planting in some Latino and Asian neighborhoods (Sacramento

reported having a similar program), and Denver's Mile High Million TPI developed key messages with talking points around three themes: trees as a legacy, trees save money, trees for environmental sustainability.

Conference participants agreed to the fact that trees can reduce crime, pavement wear, and mitigate environmental impacts at less cost than most other approaches has not been well-communicated to elected officials. Similarly, they related that most of the public has not been moved to action by the message that the presence of trees and greenspaces in cities is associated with increases in property values, perceived consumer friendliness, improved human health, and a sense of well-being. The consensus among participating managers was that the next frontier for TPIs is finding ways to make tree stewardship relevant to a much broader constituency.

A number of TPIs reported relying on non-governmental organizations (NGO) to coordinate tree planting on private property, and to some extent in streets and parks. They noted that this strategy captures the NGOs' expertise at reaching into communities to build support, participation, and a volunteer base. The municipal role includes outreach to the city family of agencies and, as in NYC, training each worker to become an environmental steward. Participants cautioned that municipal TPIs and their NGOs need to meet regularly and openly discuss their needs and expectations. Friction results if NGOs feel that they are regarded as "free labor," or cities feel that NGOs are not accountable or have an unreasonable sense of entitlement to city contracts and services.

Because public relations efforts can be expensive, most tree planting initiatives report having developed relatively inexpensive strategies to leverage partners' resources. For example, two cities described their "Grow Your Own Bats" and "Wood for Wood" initiatives that take advantage of TPI support from local baseball teams. Other managers noted that utility inserts are inexpensive outreach and education media. Numerous programs noted their use of signage on buses, bus shelters, trash trucks, and other city property to publicize their TPIs.

Many participants at the LA conference identified the goals of green industry partners as often well-aligned with those of TPIs. As a result, they reported on nursery and garden centers helping promote TPIs by offering discounted products and tree care information. They further noted how some corporations like Home Depot welcome input on products they sell, provide in-store specials, can serve as a site for tree adoptions, and have a potentially large corps of employee volunteers.

Metrics

In an era of public demand for government accountability, many Mayors are interested in the "tree count." Most TPIs represented at the conference reported having some methods for tracking the number, species, and locations of trees planted by city departments and partnering organizations. However, many of the TPI representatives at the Los Angeles workshop related how they are having difficulty in recording tree plantings on private property by residents, landscape contractors, and developers. Several programs described using their website to invite residents to enter information on trees they plant, but admitted that many plantings go unreported. For example, Million Trees LA is working with Home Depot to record numbers, species, and size of trees sold to residents of LA, but cannot know the number actually planted and surviving. All participants agreed that more research is needed on this topic.

Conference representatives identified remote sensing as the preferred tool for tracking change in tree canopy cover (TCC) for their TPIs in working to increase tree canopy. They regarded TCC increase as a better metric than tree planting numbers because it incorporates net effects of conservation and management. However, several participants commented that it may be an inferior metric from a marketing perspective, as small changes in TCC can take years to materialize and are hard to detect accurately. A participant also noted TCC assessments can be combined with computer-assisted identification of vacant planting sites to quantify tree planting potential.

The participants agreed on science and research being critical to developing more accurate and cost-effective tools for recording and tracking trees, mapping tree canopy, and identifying vacant tree planting sites. In addition, they advocated for research describing how urban greening saves money, improves the environment, and creates healthier, and more sustainable cities as of critical importance. For example, a NYC representative described their program's efforts to distill extensive data on the value of ecosystem services produced by trees into a compelling argument for city hall to create MillionTreesNYC.

Community of Practice

There was consensus among conference attendees a need exists for a network or Community of Practice (COP) to facilitate communication among practitioners involved in tree planting initiatives.



One tall order. Participants of a Los Angeles conference on tree planting initiatives identified myriad strategies in addressing Mayors' challenges, including the need to adopt more realistic goals by seeking staff input before tree planting targets are set and positioning the initiative within the larger goal of municipal sustainability.

They identified a website that serves as a venue for dialogue and repository for resources as fundamental to this effort. Conference participants located the special niche for this COP in the web of relationships that result from Mayoral adoption of urban forestry as a major policy initiative. Once a Mayor adopts a TPI, attendees noted, the political and partnering dimensions are enhanced, and fund raising, marketing, and research become more important relative to urban forestry as practiced in most cities. It is important to keep this COP in perspective, they all agreed, recognizing that urban greening is one of many initiatives executive management adopts in pursuit of a more sustainable city.

Conclusion

There was consensus among the TPI representatives attending the Los Angeles conference that TPIs present unique opportunities to advance urban forestry and urban greening. Participants expressed hope in successful implementation that deeply embeds initiatives into communities can result in multiple benefits that will endure for generations. However, many participants were cautious: managing the politics, partners, and public, often with limited resources, is complex and challenging. Thus, the conference advocated for developing a road map for implementing tree planting initiatives based on the successes and setbacks existing programs share as critical to capitalizing on the opportunities TPIs face, and will assist in growing and strengthening the number of emerging programs.

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E. Gregory McPherson is with the USDA Forest Service, PSW Research Station, Center for Urban Forest Research (Davis, CA). Robert Young is with the Department of Planning, Public Policy and Management at the University of Oregon (Eugene, OR).