A Methodology for Building Community Leader Support for Good Tree Care

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Good urban tree canopy does not happen by itself. Rather, it must be planned for by people who place a high value on trees, have a vision for building an urban forest and have the time and resources needed to make their vision reality. Transforming a personal vision for tree canopy into reality at the community level requires community buy-in. Stakeholders and decision makers in the community must share the vision or at least support it in order for that vision to become reality. Building support for community tree canopy begins with education and a community landscape committee is a good way to start. Volunteers plan and conduct outreach to teach others in the community, especially decision makers, about the value and beauty of trees, the important environmental services they provide and the best practices needed to establish and maintain them. The committee can also communicate ideas for beautification projects, identify maintenance needs, and make observations about contractor performance to property managers and the board of directors. This presentation will focus on one South Florida community’s journey to rebuild its canopy in the aftermath of Hurricane Wilma and the role that outreach and an active landscape committee played to achieve that goal.

Many communities in Florida start out with generous, code-mandated landscapes that feature abundant tree canopy, colorful shrubs and ground covers as well as turf. In many of the more developed parts of the state, these landscapes must be inspected and approved prior to issuance of a certificate of occupancy. Plans must meet the requirements of local codes and be approved by site plan committees. In effect, the approved plan represents a contract between the builder/developer and the community.

In built environments, tree canopy plays a very important role in the development process. In addition to meeting code requirements, trees can create beauty and enhance the quality of life. They can also provide critical habitat for certain species of wildlife and offset some of the negative environmental consequences of development. In some cases, landscape enhancements or upgrades can overcome community opposition to developmental projects. Once installed and approved, it is the expectation of the community that tree canopy will be maintained so the benefits may be shared by all.

When maintenance does not occur, or is done poorly as is often the case, tree canopy suffers—even in those landscapes that were of the highest quality at installation. Trees are not pruned or are pruned improperly. Mowers and weed eaters chew away at tree trunks and anchor roots. Storms, vehicular traffic accidents, construction activities (pools, additions, and circular driveways), and vandals take their toll. Drought, malfunctioning irrigation systems, lack of timely fertilization, and uncontrolled pest problems create further stresses, which lead to more losses.

This reality is far too common and occurs because many property managers and homeowner association boards are unaware of the needs of their landscapes, do not understand that codes require a reasonable standard of maintenance, and do not budget sufficient resources to provide that maintenance. Consequently, they frequently use low-bid contractors whose people are poorly trained and are not aware of best management practices. Worse yet, many property managers do not prepare good bid specifications but rather blindly trust that their contractors will always know to do the right thing because they are “professionals.”

How can this situation be rectified? For starters, we know that people value what they understand and are more likely to fund what they value. Therefore, it would seem that if property managers and boards of directors had a better understanding of the services healthy and abundant tree canopy provides, they might be inclined to place a greater value on it and direct more resources toward it.

Better understanding of and appreciation for tree canopy require that decision makers be educated about trees. Volunteers who are trained in environmental horticulture by organizations such as UF-IFAS Extension have much to offer local decision makers. Through the learning that takes place when these volunteers interact with decision makers, there is opportunity for enhanced valuation of community tree canopy and a greater likelihood of financial support for it.

Materials and Methods

This paper summarizes lessons learned from one middle class homeowners association in Weston, FL, as it moved from typical minimal homeowner association maintenance standards toward a model of active volunteer participation and commitment to building sustainable urban tree canopy following the busy 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons.

Prior to the hurricanes, this community left maintenance of its 1100 street trees largely up to the residents with the exception of once-a-year clearance pruning that the association provided. This was largely low-bid work and did nothing to address the growing problem of co-dominant leaders with included bark, a major cause of tree failure in Florida (Gilman, 2002, 2009; Gilman et
al., 2006). In the hands of the residents, most trees never received any additional care. A small percentage of trees were stub cut or hat-racked, a procedure that is considered very detrimental to tree health, safety and longevity (Gilman, 2002, 2009). About 50% of the residents mulched their street trees with various colors of organic mulch or stone. A few built planter boxes or installed paver rings around the trunks of their trees and installed flowers and/or shrubs (Fig. 1), which can also negatively impact tree health and longevity. The remainder did not maintain any tree circles and let the grass grow right up to the trunk. Some of these trees were subsequently damaged by mowers and weed eaters.

In the common areas, which are maintained exclusively by the Association, the tree canopy did not fare much better. Many of these trees were planted deeply by the developer and suffered from years of oxygen deprivation in wet, overirrigated, and overmulched soil. As was the case with the street trees, stem girdling roots were also common (Fig. 2) but nothing was done to address them. When trees in common areas died, they were typically removed in a speedy fashion, but replacement was not always a priority.

About 2 years prior to the active 2004–05 hurricane season, the Board president, who liked landscaping, asked a resident for some assistance with the trees. He also asked that this individual start a landscape committee with the purpose being to provide a forum for community input into beautification projects. A committee of five individuals was organized and began to meet monthly. They received some training from the local county extension office and began to plan several beautification projects. At the direction of the Board, they also conducted monthly inspections of the community’s common areas, reporting on such needs as irrigation malfunctions, pest infestations, and contractor performance. The committee chair summarized the information provided by each contributing committee member in a report that was presented to the Board at their monthly meeting. The information was generally well received and, over time, the Board became increasingly supportive of the activities of the committee.

The committee also alerted the Board to the poor condition of the community’s street trees, the vast majority of which had serious structural problems including numerous co-dominant stems with bark inclusions, a condition that predisposes trees to failure in high winds (Gilman, 2002). During the stormy summer months, trees shedding large stems in the streets was a fairly common occurrence. Stem girdling roots were also noted as a widespread problem. Although the Board readily supported funding the beautification projects, it was not until after Hurricane Wilma in 2005 that the Board got serious about remediating the tree canopy. That storm destroyed over 400 of the community’s street trees (Fig. 3) and nearly 100 common area trees. The massive cleanup that followed and the daunting task of pulling stumps and replacing broken sidewalks and irrigation systems along every street in the community was a turning point. As the Board mulled its options, remediation of the remaining tree canopy became a priority. So did replanting. During 2006 and into 2007, the landscape committee worked tirelessly with the Board and with management to develop a comprehensive plan to reforest the community’s streets and common areas with recommended wind-tolerant, adapted species that provide diversity and beauty (Gilman et al., 2006). It also developed specifications requiring quality trees and UF-IFAS recommended installation best practices (Gilman, 2009).

Reforestation took 3 years and resulted in the planting of 430
street trees and over 120 common area trees representing nearly 25 different species. In addition, the 700 remaining mahogany street trees have received three to four cycles of structural pruning plus two to three cycles of pruning to remove stem girdling roots. Approximately 130 common area trees have also received remedial pruning (Gilman, 2009).

In an attempt to promote better tree care and longevity, the Board also agreed with the landscape committee’s proposal that the association assume all maintenance of the community’s 1100 street trees. That included pruning, fertilization, and maintenance of mulch tree rings around each and every street tree. Although costly, this action has transformed the community’s tree canopy into a safer and much more aesthetically pleasing urban forest. The community has also received recognition from many of its residents, realtors, green industry representatives, and city officials as being one of Weston’s greenest communities. In Feb. 2009, the community hosted a meeting of the Landscape Inspectors Association of Florida (Fig. 4).

In addition to its work with management and the Board of Directors, the landscape committee has also conducted educational programs for the community’s residents. Outreach occurs through quarterly newsletter articles and a bi-annual Saturday morning “Ask the Experts” event at the community pool/cabana featuring Extension publications, demonstrations, and mini-seminars. To bolster attendance, a plant sale featuring plants from several local nurseries was added. Resident education is key to obtaining support for funding landscape improvements and investments. It also helps with compliance regarding tree protection and preservation issues.

**Results and Discussion**

Through the hard work and active participation of its landscape committee, an educated and supportive Board of Directors and property manager have moved this community toward a model of sustainability. These experiences can be used to inform and assist other communities wishing to improve the quality of their tree canopy. Some helpful ideas are summarized below:

**Starting a Landscape Committee or Community Green Team.** Identify one or more persons interested in championing the development of a community vision for sustainable urban tree canopy. Once developed, that vision needs to be shared with those individuals who are the decision makers. This process can be time-consuming and its timing must be carefully orchestrated. Decision makers must first be educated and their support must be gained. That will likely require regular attendance at Board meetings. It is imperative that the champion(s) get to know the decision makers and understand their perceptions and attitudes about urban tree canopy. Become familiar with the community’s tree canopy and its needs by walking the community frequently and taking notes. At meetings, listen carefully and take time to understand the tree and landscape-related issues that the Board and/or property manager feel are important. At each meeting, try to get some time on the agenda to share ideas and suggestions in a constructive, non-threatening way. Have photos and easy-to-read handouts or props handy and ready to share at a moment’s notice. Over time, try to form alliances with as many decision makers as possible. Be ready to accept responsibilities and tasks/assignments should they come your way. When the time is right, push to form a landscape or tree committee that will be tasked with transforming the property toward sustainability. But be patient—this will not happen overnight!

**Role of the Landscape Committee or Community Green Team.** The most important function of the landscape committee or community green team should be to champion the vision for the community’s landscape and empower the Board to stay committed to the transformation toward sustainability. The committee and/or its chair must develop a mutually beneficial relationship with the Board and property manager. It is critical that the committee understands its role is educational and advisory only and never competes with or works against the will of the Board. A secondary role of the committee is community outreach.

**Committee Tasks and Responsibilities.** There are a number of tasks that the landscape committee or green team may be responsible for as assigned by the Board of Directors or property manager. These include providing ideas for beautification projects/landscape upgrades, conducting routine inspections of contractor work, preparing a monthly maintenance needs checklist, assisting with the preparation of bid specifications, evaluating contractor references (and work at referenced sites), attending meetings with the property manager and contractor(s) when invited, reporting tree abuse to the property manager, conducting community outreach (newsletter/web page articles/plant diagnostic clinic/demonstrations/plant sales), meeting routinely to conduct business/build teamwork, and recruiting new members.

**Literature Cited**


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*Fig. 4. In Feb. 2009, the community hosted a meeting of the Landscape Inspectors Association of Florida.*