



## Exploring the characteristics of successful volunteer-led urban forest tree committees in Massachusetts

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### ABSTRACT

Citizen engagement through urban forest tree committee volunteer service may aid in providing essential experience, ideas, and skills that support municipal tree management. Using semi-structured, research interviews with tree committee (TC) representatives from across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, this study addresses current knowledge gaps concerning the general composition, processes, and relationships of volunteer-led urban forest tree committees. Our findings indicate that TC representatives are typically motivated, passionate volunteers who generally desire to work cooperatively with the many associations, organizations, and agencies that comprise the local socio-political landscape. Our findings also indicate it is important that TC representatives make a sustained, concerted effort to work collaboratively with their local tree warden to advance the care of their community's urban trees. Furthermore, it is also essential that municipal managers and decision-makers attempt to provide TC volunteers with appropriate training opportunities, resources, as well as demonstrate appreciation, to further encourage and solidify volunteer-engagement in urban forestry at the local level.

### 1. Introduction

Urbanization and the expansion of the built environment invariably results in the depletion and loss of natural resources including arable land, air and water quality, wildlife habitat, species diversity, and the degradation of natural processes including stormwater abatement, and carbon sequestration (Brown et al., 2005; Nowak et al., 2006; Nowak and Greenfield, 2012; Clapp et al., 2014). These natural processes, however, may actually be preserved and augmented, through the initiation of programs that include the installation of trees and proliferation of urban green spaces. Urban trees may offer a wide number of ecological and economic benefits including carbon sequestration, heat island abatement, air quality improvement, storm water runoff attenuation, wildlife habitat, utility cost savings, and property value enhancement (Nowak and Crane, 2002; Nowak et al., 2006; McPherson et al., 2007; Jim and Chen, 2009; Boci et al., 2018). Urban forests and access to urban green space may also offer an array of health-related benefits for residents including improvement of physical well-being, strengthening of social networks, reduction in obesity, reduction in mental fatigue, as well as the reduction of stress and enhancement of stress recovery (Parsons et al., 1998; Kuo and Sullivan, 2001; Westphal, 2003; Bell et al., 2008; van den Berg et al., 2015). Social benefits have

also been associated with urban vegetation including a greater sense of community, a heightened sense of safety, and greater social interactions (Kuo, 2003). Lipkis and Lipkis (1990) summarize these sentiments in stating,

“Tree planting...fosters community spirit and pride, bringing people together for a meaningful purpose that can build the bridges and promote the understanding that brings the neighborhood together. The initial efforts of the tree planters compound themselves as others find in the trees a deeper appreciation of the community as well as natural beauty.” (p. viii)

Citizen involvement in urban greening, including urban forest management, is a concept and practice that has been around for many years. Popular citizen interest may be traced to notable celebrations like the inaugural commemoration of “Arbor Day” in Nebraska, U.S., by J. Sterling Morton in 1872 (Jonnes, 2016). The Arbor Day festivities that the former United States Secretary of Agriculture and tree-lover initiated in Nebraska City with the planting of a million trees, would be continued by growing numbers of schools – nationally and internationally – over the ensuing decades (Jonnes, 2016). Volunteer citizen engagement at the community level also manifested in Europe and the U.S. in the late 19th century with the formation of citizen associations

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and committees concerning themselves with the management of local parks, public spaces, and urban trees (Johnston, 2015). These included the Commons Preservation Society (1865) and the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (1882) in the U.K. (Johnston, 2015), and the Brookline Tree Planting Committee (1886) in Massachusetts, that featured notable founding members Charles Sprague Sargent and Frederick Law Olmstead, Jr. (N. Geerdt, Pers. Comm.)

At present, volunteerism in the U.S. is both an important contributor to the American economy, providing an estimated annual value of \$172.9 billion USD (McKeever, 2015), as well as an important mechanism through which individuals may contribute their time, energy, knowledge and resources to the community around them (Harrison et al., 2017). It is estimated that 62.6 million individuals, or approximately one in four American adults, is currently engaged in some form of volunteerism (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Though volunteers may vary relative to their interest-levels, determination, work habits, and skill-set (Harrison et al., 2017), they are often motivated by a strong sense of contribution, and the opportunity to learn new skills and gather information (Domroese and Johnson, 2017). Volunteers may also be motivated by a sense of affiliation with other like-minded individuals, recognition for their efforts, achievement and the pursuit of excellence, power and influence, and environmental stewardship (Fazio, 2015; D. Bloniarz, Pers. Comm.).

Community members volunteering on tree committees find themselves working at the juncture of interrelated social-ecological systems (SES) where biophysical factors like tree planting and maintenance, interact with other social elements and human interests like policy decision-makers, municipal managers and employees, and property owners (Mincey et al., 2013). Tree committees endeavor to balance the demands of these different groups and to “reflect the will of the community” (Fazio, 2015) in an official capacity on issues pertaining to the management of the urban forest. Though tree committees are typically concerned with the care of trees located in urban streets and parks, they may also find themselves concerned with the management of urban trees found growing on private properties. This is an important consideration since trees growing in yards or on privately-owned landscapes may comprise up to 90% of the urban tree canopy cover of a community (Fazio, 2015).

Tree committees may arise for a variety of reasons. In some instances, they may be hastily conscripted to address the acute loss of urban tree canopy cover due to a rapidly-invading pest of importance, or in the event of a severe storm that has caused widespread damage or loss to the urban tree canopy cover (Town of Monson, 2017). Tree committees may also form, however, out of the need to address more chronic problems that have developed over time, perhaps as a result of a community’s aging and declining high-profile tree population (L. Bozzutto, Pers. Comm.). Whatever the reason behind the genesis, the best legal foundation that can support a community tree committee is typically considered to be a local ordinance, defined as legislation enacted by a municipal authority. Fazio (2015) concludes that ordinances are the best way to protect urban trees while balancing the needs of developers and urban planners. A local ordinance that recognizes, empowers, and authorizes a tree committee to carry out its mandate on behalf of urban trees and community residents can be a critical step in engaging residents and citizen volunteers in urban forest management in a positive and constructive manner. In addition to this particular type of local policy formation, tree committee members may be tasked with variety of other functions that range from routine education and advocacy, to management and administration, to advisement and consultation with elected officials and municipal forestry personnel (Fazio, 2015).

Though volunteer urban forest tree committees may have substantial influence on urban forest management and provide a productive avenue for community-wide citizen engagement, they are rarely described in the scientific literature (Greenleaf, 2016). For example, though there is a plethora of formal research concerning volunteer-led

organizations and volunteerism in general, almost none of this information has been contextualized for members of urban forest tree committees, the vast majority of whom are volunteering at the municipal level (Fazio, 2015). Furthermore, the local conditions (challenges, opportunities) under which tree committees must function have been given little, if any, consideration in the research literature. Urban forest tree committee members in New England states, for example, will likely interact with local officers known as “tree wardens” (Ricard, 2005; Harper et al., 2017). Tree wardens are unique to the New England region (i.e., Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine) of the U.S. According to Ricard and Dreyer (2005), a tree warden is a critical human component of urban and community forestry, and they posit that a municipality may not have an effective program without the leadership of this individual. As an officer, a tree warden may potentially differ from a city forester in another state or region as they are a mandated position that may work in direct cooperation with local authorities to press charges, halt construction operations, levy fines, and/or declare a tree hazardous and fit for removal (Harper et al., 2017). Little is known about the nature of the relationship between an urban forest tree committee and a tree warden. At present, no studies have been conducted to establish even a baseline understanding of the characteristics of a well-functioning volunteer-led urban forest tree committee and this research seeks to fill that gap. Our broad goal was to understand the general composition, processes, and relationships of tree committees. Specifically, we aimed to determine 1) How tree committees are organized and operate, 2) What successes and challenges tree committees have had and; 3) What relationships exist between tree committees and other urban forestry entities. In this study, we explored various perspectives regarding the characteristics of what a successful volunteer-led urban forest tree committee looked like in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, with the hope that our findings may offer insights for other urban forest tree committees.

## 2. Methods

We employed a qualitative data collection and analysis approach, utilizing data generated from semi-structured interviews with representatives from urban forest tree committees in Massachusetts, representing both small communities (i.e., Lanesborough, population approx. 3000) as well as larger cities (i.e., Fall River, population approx. 90,000). Research interviews have been used in many sectors, including the social sciences, to gather detailed knowledge from individuals that are usually recognized experts in their field, concerning a specific topic (Elmendorf and Luloff, 2007). This method has enabled credible, in-depth findings on a wide number of topics (Rubin and Rubin, 2012), including a better understanding about the human experience and how we as individuals and groups interact with the environment around us (Dampier et al., 2014).

### 2.1. Interview guide and data collection

During the spring of 2017 a 21-question interview instrument (Table 1) was constructed with input from academic and agency urban forestry specialists. Interview candidates were selected in a purposive manner (Dampier et al., 2015; Lemelin et al., 2017), with the objective that the research question would be addressed, and based specifically on the following criteria:

- Participants would be able to provide general information regarding their urban forest tree committee in Massachusetts,
- They would be in a position to offer in-depth, first-hand knowledge regarding the operations and functions of their respective urban forest tree committee,
- They could provide information about the variety of ways in which their urban forest tree committee would interact with local residents and community stakeholders.

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