



An Oddity in Thunder Bay **by Shelley Vescio, City Forester , Thunder Bay Ontario**

As the municipality's first City Forester, I'm a bit of an oddity in Thunder Bay. I tell people that they can't cut down healthy urban trees, even though they've been doing it unabated for years. When you live in the middle of the bush and pulp and paper is your primary industry, I think that many believe that cutting down trees is a birthright.

For the last 7 years, I've been on a mission to develop an urban forestry program for my community. It became clear that something had to be done about the attitudes and values surrounding urban trees, or this program would go nowhere.

To say that selling the benefits of trees has been a huge task would be an understatement. It has required me to hone my communication skills, develop a level of patience and grow several layers of skin for protection. Although the road has been arduous, I think that I can finally say that I have met with a generous measure of success. I judge this from the numbers of attitudes and practices that have changed over the last few years. I can see which strategies worked and which didn't.

I would like to stress that I had the support of the Parks Division that hired me as a forestry consultant to develop a program. My ideas were further supported by the creation of an Urban Forest Advisory Committee composed of members from the public and the City, which assisted Parks in the delivery of a program to our community.

Talking with people has been the greatest single tool that I have used to bring about change. I have spent the better portion of my years talking to individuals about trees and more importantly, listening to others. I realized that many city departments had legitimate issues with trees so I met with each of them and talked with supervisors and field staff to find out what these were. Where the solutions were not simple, I worked with the departments to find compromises. By finding compromises and being reasonable with people, I have observed that attitudes and practices have changed.

From meeting with municipal staff on their own turf, I was able to identify allies who were reluctant to speak up initially but who appreciated the value of trees to the urban landscape. These individuals were often the ones who would offer a workable solution to a particular tree/other infrastructure conflict only when all else had been exhausted. These allies have slowly grown in number as it has become more socially acceptable to value trees as a component of urban infrastructure. Each ally has assisted in bringing about changes in their day-to-day operations. Some are in management and others are in field positions.

I have also spent countless hours talking to homeowners about the importance of their boulevard trees. This one-to-one attention has paid off because the community is now much more aware and vocal about the benefits of trees on their streets and parks.

This solid support was also demonstrated by the formation of Trees Thunder Bay, the community urban forest advocacy group. Two individuals took the lead in developing this organization, which today provides a strong voice in the community and boasts a membership of 700 members. Three members of this group also sit on the Parks Division Urban Forestry Advisory Committee.

The media has been especially effective in promoting the importance of the urban forest. They pay particular attention to current issues.

Construction contractors have been a particularly important group to communicate with considering their potential impact on boulevard trees. Backed by two-year-old Tree Protection Standards, I have been working with them and offering workshops to increase their understanding that trees are a living component of municipal infrastructure that require protection equal to any other component.

Allies exist within the construction trades. These have been important for me to discover so that I can use them as examples of contractors who appreciate the value of the urban forest and who have figured out economical methods for solving problems that hitherto would have been solved by tree removals. I have been pleasantly surprised by some of these solutions, and although we have a long way to go, I know that we can work together to protect trees and conduct construction.

In order to be successful, an urban forestry program must have a solid foundation of public and political support. The basis for this support lies in an understanding that trees are economically, socially, and environmentally integral to the health of urban environments. In Thunder Bay we have been successful in laying this foundation and look forward to maintaining it and building a program that is innovative and responsive to the needs of our community.