

CTC Tree Ordinance Roundtable Notes
Wednesday Oct. 1, 2003
Athens, GA

9:45 a.m. Tree Ordinance Roundtable began with more than thirty individuals in attendance. Maureen O'Brien, Chair of the ACC Community Tree Council (CTC) welcomed everyone. Roger Cauthen, ACC Landscape Management Administrator gave a historical overview of the CTC and describe the strong community interest in tree protection. The current development code contains some tree policy, but Cauthen noted that these questions are now at the forefront of many CTC discussions: Is what we have enough? What is the best fit ("stand alone" tree ordinance or incorporate into the development code?) Is now the time to mobilize?

Connie Head, ACC Community Forester, introduced Lloyd Kerr, Building Official, City of Covington, as the first speaker. Kerr noted that their tree ordinance had been in place for 11 years and they had just received the Silver Award for being a Tree City for 10 years. They looked at existing canopy and their survey showed 60% within the city limits. Their major goal is to not lose anymore. Kerr stressed that their tree ordinance has "teeth" in it, and demands more preservation than in many communities. Builders must file a "Soil and Tree Conservation Plan" and clearly identify "tree-save" areas. These areas are checked to see if trees are actually protected. For example, is protective fencing in place? Kerr concluded that they try to give everything possible to the builders to help their design be a good one. For example, is there enough permeable area per tree (such as in parking lots) and is there enough distance from utility poles and buildings, etc.?

Cheryl Delk, Special Projects Planner, Newton County was introduced next. Delk noted that their current tree ordinance is not a good one. However, parking lot requirements are good, as well as long driveway requirements which state that such driveways be tree-lined. They try to have larger trees preserved, but anyone "can get around" that requirement.

Rick Cowick, ACC Development Services Director, spoke next. He noted that one of his areas of concern was the need for better relationship between ACC Planning and ACC Landscaping. Another aspect of his discussion was the requirement of tree canopy coverage to be 40% when a landscape plan is submitted by a builder. However, just by putting in the street trees and parking lot trees, this requirement is usually met. He concluded that it is one thing to look at what is shown on the proposed landscape plan, and another thing to actually go out and see that what is done is what was on the plan.

Carl Jordan, ACC Commissioner, made a comment. He pointed out that there is no real requirement to protect established trees since it only says "preserve if preservable." Mass grading is now occurring throughout the county. This modifies the soils so greatly, that this approach reduces the chances of reestablishing trees in that area.

Bob Barker, CTC Program Coordinator, made a comment. He explained that part of the problem is due to the way the tree policy is written. It includes “qualitative statements, but where are the quantitative standards?” Those qualitative statements lead to ambiguity since they lack specificity.

Kristina Eicher, Arborist, City of Alpharetta, spoke next. She described their tree ordinance as having been successful in protecting their trees for three years now, particularly some amendments were added to clear up certain problems with it. As for grading of land, they are strict about it. No grading can be done without a Land Disturbance Permit. If this permit is applied for, builders must do a Tree Survey which includes the understory specimens. Common sense is used. Any tree to be saved, must be a “good save,” meaning that those trees are healthy. Also, the term “density” is carefully understood to mean trees spread out on site, and builders can’t just get density by planting all the trees in the back of the site. She concluded that much of their success comes from a strong partnership between the Arborist and the Planning Dept. which evolved over the years. This partnership is actually a group effort, involving the traffic engineer and stormwater design. They found that much time and money is saved by having discussions early on. This partnership prevents costly problems later on.

Van Moore, Arborist, Forsyth County, spoke next. He explained that his county was in the midst of making changes to their tree ordinance, so he had nothing finalized to present. He noted that they had a “bad grandfather clause” which allowed any land disturbing activity to occur unless the property was zoned after the tree ordinance was passed. (For property zoned after the tree ordinance was passed, a land disturbing permit is now required.)

Jessica Roth, Arborist, City of Snellville, spoke next. She pointed out that tree protection plans must be prepared by a certified arborist or certified landscape architect. She explained that this has resulted in better quality plans than what the engineers in the past did. No clear cutting is allowed, and to get a nice mix of diversity among the trees, the plans must show a certain ration of understory to overstory species. Density requirements also include an “age mix” to incorporate a lifespan consideration. The certified arborist is required to be retained to work on the trees, because care is crucial for trees for their longevity. (This is important, because if some sort of “care requirement” is not included in a tree ordinance, then they WON’T do a thing for the trees in many cases!)

Also, four inspections are required by this certified arborist who is retained by the developer: before site is cleared, after site is cleared, after any grading of the site, and finally, after the site is finished and needs a Certificate of Occupancy (CO.)

Roth concluded that the City Engineer works closely with her (similar to the partnership in Alpharetta described earlier.) Also, she works with the Code Compliance Officer who not only has construction experience, but is also fluent in Spanish in order to communicate better with the large number of Hispanic workers involved in many of the construction sites.

Ray Probart, Arborist, Rockdale County, spoke next. He noted that he is in the position to give lists of what tree species are best for certain sites. This helps avoid bringing in problem “nonnative” trees, such as Chinese elms. These can cause problems in a community later on. He encourages species diversity and native trees. Metal posts are required for protective tree fencing, as these fences have a way of “moving” away from where they are supposed to be. Also, it is a requirement that the engineer “walk the site” with the arborist right at the start to discuss staking of areas for clearing and asking, “What is appropriate to save?”

Nancy Roney, Planning Department, Gwinnett County spoke next. She explained that their 1987 tree ordinance was criticized for being a “tree replacement” ordinance and not being much of a “tree preservation” ordinance. They adopted changes to strengthen their code. They also have a Tree Advisory Committee, which often acts as helpful observers to bring tree concerns to her attention. She presented the booklet she developed for helping people understand the tree ordinance requirements: on one side was the legal wording, while on the other side of the page was the “plain talk” and diagrams to make it clear about what is expected.

A question and answer session followed with audience participation. Highlights of the discussion included: Kerr describing Covington’s tree nursery which is used to replace such trees as street trees. Eicher explaining how Alpharetta has a tree bank, but these funds are only used for the planting of trees. Several panelists noted that it would be useful to go beyond just trees and set up the bank to also be used for “tree education programs.”

Underground utilities were mentioned. In new subdivisions it can be quite cost effective, however, in older neighborhoods, it is too expensive and difficult to do.

Bob Barker presented, “The Value of Knowing the State of Your Tree Canopy.” He noted that Community Forest Information System (CFIS) is accessible on the ACC server and network.

Further discussion included: Moratoria use was rare. Cherokee County did have a sewer moratorium in 2002. Irrigation was an important part of some tree ordinances. Roth noted that in Snellville, there must be drip irrigation for trees which must be installed before CO can be issued. Further, it must be tested and kept running for two years.

Eicher gave a more detailed account of “Plan Review Meetings” in Alpharetta. The traffic, storm water, landscaping and planning individuals all meet once a week to coordinate plans and work out any issues before any of the plans are approved. Cowick of ACC reiterated that ACC Planning and Landscaping need a closer relationship in order to better work out planning issues.

Moore noted how important it was to advise builders ahead of time about proper planting of trees. He reminds them, “This is your investment!” Eicher sets up a 10 minute talk on

what her department expects and what will be noticed out at the site. Probart explained how he instructs builders to take out any wrong trees or poor trees if planted at their sites.

Joe Burgess, Urban/Wildland Interface Coordinator, Georgia Forestry Commission, spoke next. He explained how the importance of tree ordinances evolved as citizens become more aware of the benefits derived from trees and how trees add to the quality of life. He listed certain objectives which are needed, such as: a consensus on what the tree ordinance should do, achievable realities, publicity (ongoing little articles in newspaper, newsletters, etc.) and awareness of what others need (builders, Chamber of Commerce, neighborhoods, etc.) He stressed the importance of continually showing to the public the many benefits of a forest canopy in their own community.

(Notes submitted by Liz Conroy, current CTC member)