



## Street Tree Ordinance Revision FAQ's

*Disclaimer: This fact sheet is for informational purposes only; refer to VMC 12.04 for full ordinance text.*

### **What is the Street Tree Ordinance? Who enforces the ordinance?**

The Street Tree Ordinance, Title 12, Chapter 04 of the Vancouver Municipal Code, regulates the planting, pruning, and removal of all street trees in Vancouver. The Street Tree Ordinance is enforced by the City's Urban Forestry Program.

### **When was the Street Tree Ordinance revised? When do the revisions take effect?**

City Council adopted the revised Street Tree Ordinance on October 16, 2006; it is effective as of November 15, 2006.

### **What is a street tree?**

A "street tree" is defined as a tree whose trunk, in whole or in part, is within the public right-of way. In cases where there is a planting strip between the sidewalk and the curb, any tree within the planting strip is considered a street tree. If no sidewalk exists, or if the sidewalk is directly adjacent to the curb, the width of the right-of-way varies depending on the location of underground utilities. If in doubt as to whether or not a tree is within the right-of-way, it is advised to check with Urban Forestry before beginning any major tree work.

### **Who maintains street trees in Vancouver?**

Although street trees are considered public property because they lie in the public right-of-way, the adjacent property owner is responsible for all aspects of street tree maintenance, including planting, pruning, and removal. Street tree maintenance responsibility is assigned similarly in most Pacific Northwest cities; Eugene, OR and Longview, WA are notable exceptions where the municipality maintains all street trees. Utility companies regularly prune tree branches near power lines to ensure safety and prevent disruption of utility service.

### **When did the revision process begin? Who was involved?**

The Street Tree Ordinance revision process began in 2001 when Vancouver's Urban Forestry Commission endorsed the concept and chartered a committee. The Street Tree Ordinance Revision Committee (STORC) was a blue ribbon committee whose members represented various stakeholder groups, including neighborhood associations, the business community, realtors, the tree care industry, planners, the construction industry, and downtown business owners. City of Vancouver staff provided advice throughout the process, conducted research, and drafted the final ordinance language. The STORC held meetings from July 2001 through May 2002 and the City of Vancouver has spent the last several years finalizing the details of the ordinance.

### **Why did the original Street Tree Ordinance need to be revised?**

The original Street Tree Ordinance was adopted in 1963 and did not reflect modern arboricultural knowledge and trends in municipal urban forest management. The original Street Tree Ordinance was inadequate because:

- maintenance responsibility was not explicitly defined, which caused confusion among some property owners.
- there was no replacement requirement associated with tree removals, which led to a significant net loss of street trees over time.
- topping and other inappropriate tree care practices were not addressed, which allowed many street trees to be irreparably damaged or destroyed, resulting in public safety hazards and increased tree mortality.
- it did not include a list of preferred street trees and the list of prohibited trees was extremely limited; thus, many property owners planted inappropriate trees (e.g., trees with messy fruit, trees with aggressive surface roots, trees that grew too big for the available space, and trees that are considered invasive species).
- enforcement authority was only through criminal, not civil, prosecution.

*(over)*

## **How is the revised Street Tree Ordinance different from the original? What are the benefits of the revisions?**

The revised Street Tree Ordinance features multiple improvements which will elevate the standard of street tree care in Vancouver and ultimately foster a healthier urban forest. New changes or additions include:

- a **clarification of street tree maintenance** responsibility.
- a requirement for **replacing trees** following removal, which will ensure no net loss in street tree canopy.
- a requirement that all tree work be done according to **national arboricultural standards**, including an explicit provision against **topping**, which will protect overall tree health and enhance public safety.
- a “**street tree work permit**” requirement for **major pruning** of street trees. Major pruning is defined as pruning limbs over three inches in diameter, root pruning, or removing more than 15 percent of the tree’s canopy.
- a requirement that all major pruning of street trees be conducted by an individual or firm possessing a City of Vancouver **Street Tree Worker License (STWL)**. [Effective 5/17/07] The STWL will be issued, free of charge, to any individual or firm that meets the qualifications. One of the main qualifications for obtaining a STWL is having at least one arborist certified by the International Society of Arboriculture on staff. The City will maintain a list of STWL holders for public distribution.
- an expanded list of **prohibited street trees**.
- a new list of **approved street trees**, which will ensure that the right tree is planted in the right place.
- the creation of a new **Street Tree Manual**, an educational document which includes standards and specifications for tree planting, pruning, and care; the list of approved street trees; best management practices; and other information.
- a provision for both **civil and criminal enforcement** by the City Forester.

## **What is the process for obtaining a street tree pruning or removal permit?**

The permit application is available online at [www.cityofvancouver.us/urbanforestry](http://www.cityofvancouver.us/urbanforestry) (click “Tree Permits” and then click “Street Tree Pruning or Removal Permit”). Complete the application and return it to Vancouver Urban Forestry for review. Your permit application may take several days to process; do not begin any major tree work until you have been issued a permit. Permits are valid for 90 days.

## **What is the process for obtaining a street tree worker’s license?**

The Street Tree Worker’s License application is available online at [www.cityofvancouver.us/urbanforestry](http://www.cityofvancouver.us/urbanforestry) (click on “Tree Care and Planting” and then click “Street Tree Worker’s License”). Complete the application and return it to Vancouver Urban Forestry for review. Your License application may take several days to process; do not begin any major tree work until you have been issued a Street Tree Worker’s License.

## **How many street trees are there in Vancouver?**

According to the 2003 Tree Canopy Report completed by Vancouver Urban Forestry and Clark County GIS, approximately 12.5 percent of Vancouver’s existing tree canopy is within the public right-of-way. However, there are literally thousands of available street tree planting locations where new trees could be planted.

## **But don’t we have enough trees?**

Vancouver’s tree canopy has declined dramatically in recent decades. Our current total tree canopy is only 19.7 percent, much less than the 40 percent recommended by the conservation organization American Forests. Through the Canopy Restoration Program, Vancouver Urban Forestry hopes to increase total tree canopy to 28 percent. To achieve that canopy goal, Urban Forestry is partnering with community volunteers, neighborhood associations, other government agencies, and the non-profit organization Friends of Trees to conduct tree planting projects.

## **Why are street trees so important?**

Street trees are protected as a vital community natural resource because the City of Vancouver is committed to maintaining a high quality of life for all citizens. Trees improve air quality, reduce water pollution from stormwater runoff, provide cooling and shade in summer, enhance neighborhood livability, stimulate economic development, calm traffic speeds, and provide numerous other environmental, social, and economic benefits. Because of these numerous benefits, trees are considered “green infrastructure.”

## **Who should I contact if I have questions about the Street Tree Ordinance?**

Contact Vancouver Urban Forestry at (360) 619-1128 or [urbanforestry@ci.vancouver.wa.us](mailto:urbanforestry@ci.vancouver.wa.us). Additional information and downloadable documents are available at [www.cityofvancouver.us/urbanforestry](http://www.cityofvancouver.us/urbanforestry).