

GAIN SUPPORT FOR TREE PROGRAMS BY WORKING WITH LOCAL MEDIA

By Michael Searce, consulting arborist, Baton Rouge, LA.

As city governments grind along toward providing their priority services, public tree care is often found at the bottom of the stack. Street repair, drainage, new construction, and refuse disposal are usually the top order of the day. However, as more and more of our urban trees tumble before the heavy equipment of progress the ones which remain gain in importance. The less there is of any one commodity, the more valuable it becomes.

The remaining public trees belong to the citizens; the voters. The liaison between the public and their trees is the municipal forester or city arborist and all too often one of his most powerful tools is neglected. That tool is not a spray rig or a power saw. It's the local news media!

Just as a chain saw performs best when well oiled, so does the public best support an urban tree care program when kept informed as to its problems and successes.

The municipal arborist will almost always find the local print and broadcast media eager to cover his story. In Baton Rouge, La. the city Beautification division has never had a public service announcement turned down. As a matter of fact, the accompanying photo was shot and donated free of charge by WAFB TV.

The media is, in essence, the private citizen's only means of keeping abreast of how his elected representatives spend his tax dollars. Regular monitoring of the city council can result in its becoming more responsive to the desires of those it represents.

In Baton Rouge, we have used the local media as a pry bar to lift the heavy lid of obscurity from

municipal tree care. A regular weekly column I call "Out On A Limb" has been running in a local newspaper for a year and a half. The column approach provides continuous information about such topics as how trees function, what stresses occur in urban environments and how those

The more informed a person is, the more interested he becomes in community tree programs.

stresses can best be dealt with. Pertinent do-it-yourself tips for the interested homeowner are well received, also. We have found that the better educated and more involved a person is concerning his own trees, the more interested he becomes in the health and appearance of his community's public trees.

Occasional feature stories in local magazines or newspapers help acquaint readers with specific tree care programs, let them know what their urban forester is trying to accomplish, and most importantly, keep the concept of public tree care fresh in their minds.

Both print and broadcast media coverage are useful for "spot request" type stories. This can include the introduction of such programs as seasonal volunteering, neighborhood self-help projects, requests for the reporting of damaged or unhealthy public trees, summer watering of street trees, and requests for donations of seedlings or mulching materials. Response is sometimes overwhelming. One lady recently responded to our request in the local newspaper for winter mulch by donating 500 bales of hay!

Local T.V. and radio talk show hosts seem to be quite receptive to devoting shows to municipal tree care whether in the format of an interview with the city's tree specialist or having him/her field questions from the public by telephone. We are planning weekly radio call-in type shows with high expectations. A regularly scheduled local ½ hour home owner's T.V. show in Baton Rouge has expressed interest in doing a show concerning various aspects of public/private tree care, ordinances and legalities, and power line clearing problems.

Television public service announcements can be invaluable for rallying the public hue and cry over important tree care issues as they come up before the city council. In Baton Rouge, we have found that nothing elicits response from the public better than T.V. news coverage of a vandalized oak or the saving and transplanting of a mature Palm tree.

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News coverage is not difficult to get. Support is largely derived from public knowledge of tree programs.