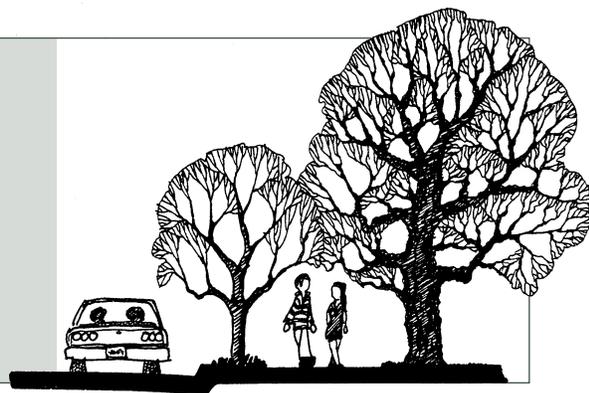


Urban and Community Forestry in Pennsylvania



Working with Local Government for Successful Urban Forests

Developing good relationships with community officials is essential in putting “green issues” on the agendas of local governments. Citizen advocacy groups, including those concerned with trees and other environmental issues, often react quickly in response to a crisis, and sometimes they disband after the immediate problem is resolved. It is best to develop working relationships with community leaders before a crisis occurs.

By finding out the different roles and powers of elected officials and department heads, you can concentrate on gaining the cooperation of those who can best support your program. The city or borough manager’s office is a good starting point to reach the appropriate officials. Think about the perspectives of those you are meeting with and try to understand them. Will they be supportive of green or environmental issues?

Approach meetings with officials as you would other business meetings. State your concerns and ideas concisely and explain why they are important. In your discussion, use

specific examples of issues and opportunities and be ready to present sound, logical arguments to support your position. Understand the costs and financial impacts of your requests and propose various options.

If there is opposition to your program, consider alternatives that will enable officials to address the concerns of opposing groups. Prepare a program summary in writing with specific examples and financial information. Distribute the summary before your meeting begins and refer to it during the discussion.

Ways to work with community officials

Observing the guidelines below will help you to develop successful relationships with community officials and their staff.

- Make your concerns known to community officials as early as possible in the development of a program. One of the first objectives of any community program should be to gain the support of local officials.
- Be respectful and friendly. Your objective is to gain friends and allies, not make enemies. Give officials and staff members the opportunity to convey their thoughts and listen carefully to what they say.
- Try to meet with city officials personally rather than in a public hearing to convince and solicit support for a project. A private conversation can be more comfortable for you and the officials. If you are successful, you probably will be invited to speak about your program in a public forum.
- If you have been asked to discuss your program at a public hearing, take the time to prepare a professional presentation. Find out the position and attitudes of the whole council or commission and anticipate questions and concerns that you may be required to address during the hearing. Listening to questions and comments from officials can help you understand their attitudes. Take notes and be prepared to answer questions in a thoughtful manner.

- To keep community leaders informed about your program, place their names on your mailing list and regularly send them copies of newsletters and other correspondence.
- Invite officials to participate in your projects. Ask them to speak at a volunteer effort, lunch meeting, or other occasion, and invite them to take part in photo opportunities and news conferences.

- Ask local candidates to appear jointly in a nonpartisan forum during elections.
- Use letters to follow up on unresolved concerns or requests. The letter should clearly identify the problem(s), urge a resolution, and indicate that a reply is expected.
- Send helpful officials and staff letters of thanks with copies to the mayor, department heads, or other leaders.

When working with officials, remember that you have the right to express your views and opinions and that officials and legislators want to listen and help. You have the opportunity to bring unique information and perspectives to community leaders. Building partnerships and cooperation will greatly improve the chance of having a successful program or project.

The Pennsylvania Urban and Community Forestry Program is a cooperative effort of the state Department of Environmental Resources (DER) Bureau of Forestry and Penn State with leadership provided by the Pennsylvania Urban and Community Forestry Council.

For more information, contact the Extension Urban Forestry Program, School of Forest Resources. The Pennsylvania State University, 108 Ferguson, University Park, PA 16802; (814) 863-7941.

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