

**THE GLEN RIDGE SHADE TREE COMMISSION'S YEAR-END REPORT:  
DECEMBER 2015**



**Prepared for Mayor Peter Hughes with the thanks of the Commission members for his unfailing support. Because of it, we have striven to live up to his highest expectations, and perceive the trees being planted for tomorrow as a vital part of his enduring legacy.**

**Respectfully Submitted by:**

**Elizabeth Baker, Chair**

**Larry Stauffer**

**Eric Hanan**

**Andrew Tedesco**

**Joan Lisovicz**

**Michael Zichelli, Secretary**

**A Brief History:**

From the borough's inception, the development of a lavish tree-scape was a preeminent concern. In 1910, therefore, the mayor and council established a Shade Tree Commission to oversee the appropriate and systematic planting of trees. Simultaneously, they drafted a foresighted ordinance, which prohibited the use of "salt water" on borough "highways" as well as the installation of "power poles" along them. (It is worth noting that the mayor and council knew at the time this ordinance was drafted that this latter provision was in contradiction of state law.) Clearly, these early town efforts paid off. In 1914, the state forester reported that *"the value of Glen Ridge trees was greater than that of any town for which he had figures."* By the 1930s, the town could actually boast of some 7,000 public trees, 4,900 of them street trees. So it is no wonder that a 1937 real-estate guide to the communities of NJ extolled: *"A million dollars' worth of trees shade the streets of Glen Ridge and impart to it unusual scenic beauty."*

Indeed, the original STC did its job so well that in 1941 it seemed no longer essential. As a result, it was disbanded in favor of a shade tree division within the DPW. In the budget-cutting 1960s, even the latter seemed unnecessary; it, too, was disbanded, leaving the DPW with *"no policy for tree maintenance"* except recourse to the county agricultural agent when questions arose. Otherwise, it simply took down those trees that were clearly dead or dying, replacing them almost invariably with maples. So by the 1980s, when maple decline became a major issue, this species constituted a full 67% of the town's trees. Also by this time, many of the borough's street trees in older neighborhoods were reaching the end of their lifespans. Consequently, the number of takedowns each year from 1986 onward began to skyrocket, leaving no budgeted allowance for tree planting or pruning.

To address this snowballing situation, the Shade Tree Commission was re-established in Glen Ridge in 2010, under Mayor Hughes' leadership. Under its first chair, Tim Delorm, the Commission took a comprehensive inventory of and their condition. This public street trees in the 3,000, and that a significant removed in the next few constrained attempt to stem inaugurated its "Plant 600" program. In the next three \$24,000, commensurate to the loss of 80 trees to the trees to Sandy plummeted



the borough's public trees revealed that the number of borough hovered around number would need to be years. In a budget-this attrition, the commission campaign, an adopt-a-tree years, it collected more than 90 trees being planted. But October Snowstorm and 120 the number of street trees to

below 3,000, making it apparent that the replanting of the town could not be done through a process of donation alone. Thankfully, Mayor Hughes and the council understood the situation and approved a capital outlay for the planting of 1,000 trees over a five-year period.

Given the heady responsibility of overseeing this capital project, the Commission decided a Master Plan should be professionally drafted to provide an overarching vision, specific goals, and step-by-step guidelines. A companion Resource Guide was also developed, outlining which tree species were appropriate for different circumstances. Even though these documents were principally prepared by an outside firm, Commission members were involved in every phase. And, while the Master Plan is inspiring, it is also sobering, as it identifies all the problems that must be addressed: an aging tree population, too much of a monoculture, narrow planting beds, soil compaction, a fear of trees, and reckless landscapers. Nonetheless, the members of the STC are remarkably dedicated, hard-working and determined.

## 2015 IN REVIEW

### Planting:



During the final months of 2014, when the Master Plan was being finalized for presentation to the mayor and council, the Commission completed its first major planting of 105 trees. The majority of these saplings were planted in the center of town, just south of Bloomfield Avenue, where a canopy cover analysis had revealed the greatest tree deficit. This area also allowed for a focus on so-called “gateway” streets, such as Woodland Avenue, Hillside Avenue and Clark Street. Certain procedures were followed that proved successful and shall be continued:

- Commission members, along with the town arborist, actually walked the area of town to be planted to determine the ideal planting spots and the tree species most appropriate to each.
- Weeks before the planting, residents were sent a letter telling them what tree was to be planted in front of their house. If the resident demurred, the tree was not planted.
- At the time of the planting, homeowners were given a specially-prepared sapling-care brochure.

Despite this fall ‘14 planting, the Commission considers 2015 its inaugural year under the Master Plan. To that end, it was decided that a real statement would be made by planting 29 flowering cherry trees along Bloomfield Avenue, from Highland to RWA, to commemorate Arbor Day, April 27<sup>th</sup>, with the mayor and council. An additional 77 trees of various species were subsequently planted.\* In the run-up to this spring planting, the Commission further decided that gator bags would be placed on all of the spring-planted saplings, as well as those planted the previous fall. While the primary intention behind this decision was to facilitate residents in keeping their trees properly watered, it was also hoped that the bags would increasingly draw the public’s attention to the Commission’s extensive new plantings. And so they have – sparking a dramatically increase in the number of tree requests from residents.

Over the summer, however, the Commission made the decision not to have another 100-tree planting this fall. It was felt that we needed to consolidate our gains and take stock of lessons learned in the spring. These included:

- Lingering winter conditions had made it difficult to finalize planting locations and the list of tree species desired. This, in turn, delayed the actual plantings. Indeed, some saplings were not put in the ground until July. And then, of course, there was the drought.
- In order to monitor the condition of the fall and spring saplings during the hot dry summer, Mike Zichelli prepared a town map designating their locations. Then the map was divided into 5 segments and a commissioner was assigned to each. Thus, we commissioners needed a breather from taking on another 100 newbies in the fall.
- Despite our ministrations, 20 trees from our fall 2014 and spring 2015 plantings did not survive.

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\* The Commission is striving for biodiversity. Of the 450 trees planted 2013 through 2015, oaks accounted for 18%, maples 18%, lindens 11%, cherries 11%, yellowwoods 8%, gums 6%, Kentucky coffees 4%, macckias 2%, elms 2%, London planes 1%, ginkgos 1%, others 18%.

Nonetheless, the Commission did oversee the planting of 89 trees in October. These included 50 trees given to us by the county, 19 resident-requested trees, as well as the aforementioned 20 replacement trees. Although not required to do so, the STC decided to plant the county trees along county roads. Belleville Avenue has been particularly enhanced by this planting.

Planning ahead for spring 2016, Rich Wolowicz will begin selecting and tagging the best of the required trees in January or February, rather than having the planting contractor do it later in the spring when the rush is on. We are also determined to get our bid specs out shortly to enable a planting period of no later than May. Getting this head start will hopefully ensure that we plant the best quality trees at the ideal time this spring.

### **Takedowns and Tree Pruning:**

In March, Glen Ridge was notified that its third Community Forestry Management Plan had been approved. This plan requires a review of the condition of all public trees to deem which should be pruned and which removed for safety sake. Over the past several years, investments in staff and equipment have improved the Public Works Department's ability to perform work on our street trees, including the removal of those that are 14 inches or less in diameter at breast height. Many of the department's chainsaws have been upgraded and the staff formally trained in chainsaw safety. The town also took delivery of a new chipper in 2015. The larger and more reliable chipper, along with the acquisition of a new large truck and high-capacity chipper box, vastly increases the DPW's ability to handle larger trees and remove debris much more rapidly. So in 2015, 20 trees were removed in-house, while an outside company, Hi-Tech, won the bid to remove 21 larger trees. (Two trees have yet to be taken down, however.)



Proper pruning prolongs the lives of trees by minimizing the spread of disease or pests and reducing wind resistance, while ensuring public safety. Therefore, another major significance of the capital outlay for new trees is that money can now be used each year for pruning. It has always been the goal of the Commission to get to the place where 35% of trees are pruned on an "as needed" basis, while the remaining 65% are maintenance pruned. This is a goal we hope to reach in 2 years. This year, however, we came close: 29 trees were elevated and 8 were cleared of hangers and deadwood, bringing the "as needed" pruning to 40%, whereas 58 trees, or 60%, were maintenance pruned. Many of these latter trees were on Forest Avenue.

### **Community Outreach:**

In the final analysis, the STC realizes that public education is key to its success. That is why commissioners focused considerable attention on the planting of the 29 cherry trees along Bloomfield Avenue as a well-publicized Arbor Day commemoration with the mayor and council. And this effort did spark a spate of helpful articles about the town's reforestation efforts in the newspapers.

But the STC members also put a great deal of emphasis on the Eco-Fair. Michael Zichelli came up with a game which sent kids and parents on a "mission" to scope out trees and answer questions about them based on a reading of QR codes. Commissioners also manned a table at the fair, not only to hand out brochures and discuss plans and goals with residents, but also to answer any questions or concerns.

In addition, our spring saplings were fitted out with small plastic labels with QR codes and the words "Hug Me." When read, the QR code provides care instructions and information about the tree species. Unfortunately, the creation of these labels was onerous. They did, however, garner considerable interest and attention.

Last but not least, the STC organized a remarkably successful historic tree tour last October, led by Betsy Ginsburg. It was attended by more than 40 people, and the unsolicited feedback was uniformly enthusiastic. Hopefully, this will become an annual event.

### **Looking Ahead:**

Obviously, the Commission's primary concentration for the next few years must be on its 1,000-tree-planting project. But even when that is completed, the work of the Commission will not be done. The young trees will need to be monitored and pruned to ensure they grow straight and true with one dominant leader. So it can be anticipated that more resources will have to be shifted into this effort. Sadly, the average street tree in NJ lasts only 8 years. Naturally, we want ours to last for generations. It will also be the ongoing effort of the Commission to maintain an updated tree inventory and to re-examine the Master Plan as circumstances evolve.

There are, however, tree issues on the horizon which may have to be addressed in the near future. One of these is the introduction into NJ of the emerald ash borer. Luckily, Glen Ridge has only 43 ash street trees. But these must be monitored and decisions made when the borer strikes. It is possible to treat the trees, but the treatments must be repeated and the costs are high. Nonetheless, those costs must be balanced against the potential costs in any given year of excessive takedowns.

Another of the Commission's goals is to further equip the DPW for tree work. The borough's current stump grinder, for example, was built in 1984. Due to its age and engine configuration, it vapor locks on days when the temperature is over 80 degrees. Since most of the in-house tree work is performed in the summer, this is obviously a major drawback. Therefore, we would like to see a small, efficient, and agile stump grinder purchased for DPW use in the immediate future. Not only would it increase the staff's productivity, but it would also provide the forester with the ability to personally grind roots when a contractor seeks to replace the sidewalk in the area of a street tree. Another acquisition desired is a lift. Having one would allow for a much more rapid and economical response to the incidence of dangerous hanging limbs, and would facilitate, along with training, more in-house pruning. The lift could also be used for maintaining the gutters on the Municipal Building.

And, of course, the Commission is determined to further and augment its community outreach program.