

The little city that could: Wilsonville demonstrates tree care planning, leadership

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Even casual visitors to the city of Wilsonville can't help but notice it's a city with an abundance of well-placed and well-cared-for trees.

A small city located 15 miles south of Portland on the I-5 corridor, Wilsonville has been recognized as a Tree City USA community by the National Arbor Day Foundation since 1997. The Tree City USA program encourages tree planting and care of trees throughout urban areas in the United States. It should come as no surprise, then, to learn that residents of Wilsonville take great pride in their "urban forest." "Urban forest" is the name given to describe all the trees in a city - both native and planted - that contribute to its seasonal beauty and livability.

Long Range City Planner Chris Neamtzu ►



These large trees retained during home construction in this Villebois development give the area an "old neighborhood" feel, and are a testament to good planning by both the developer and city planners.



Hundreds of young native trees, mostly Oregon white oak, dot Wilsonville's Graham Oaks Natural Area, formerly slated to become a golf course. "It took a decade to pass the Greenspaces bond measure and wrest it away from the State for a Metro regional park," says Mayor Lehan.



Photos by Cynthia Orlando, ODF

While it might be difficult to identify the one or two factors most paramount to Wilsonville's Tree City status and ongoing commitment to trees, it's a safe bet Long Range City Planner Chris Neamtzu and Wilsonville's Mayor Charlotte Lehan can assume part of the credit.

First step: a tree ordinance

When he first started working for Wilsonville some 13 years ago, a "big picture" approach to tree care had yet to develop, says Neamtzu. Like many cities at the time, tree preservation projects were primarily tied to specific developments; there was no overarching tree ordinance.

Recognizing the impact a strong urban forestry program can have in enhancing the quality of life in a community, the city adopted a tree preservation ordinance in 1996. Developed over a year-and-a-half with time set aside for public meetings and broad stake holder comments, Wilsonville's tree code is first in a series of things Neamtzu says were critical to the city's success in fostering a strong tree care program. And, the tree code seems to be working well - "we've never amended it yet," says Neamtzu with a smile.



Creative play area at Sophia Park in Vellebois, Wilsonville, Oregon. The dry stream bed collects runoff from the immediate area and provides an attractive play element that manages and cleanses rainwater.

Then, add a natural resources plan

"Wilsonville has also always protected its prime riparian (streamside) corridors," says Neamtzu, who adds that much of the soil in the Wilsonville area is ice-age flood deposited soil that was delivered to the area during a succession of floods called the Missoula or Bretz Floods more than 10,000 years ago. Realizing the long-term conservation values at stake, the city made a concerted effort to work closely with the regional government, Metro, to acquire these prime parcels.

Four years in the making, Wilsonville also has a natural resources plan that was adopted in 2001. Called the "natural resources plan" for short, its full title - Natural Resource Inventory Compliance and Protection Plan - is a mouthful. A project manager at the time, Neamtzu led community efforts in developing it. Wilsonville's natural resources plan protects:

- riparian (streamside) corridors
- significant wetlands
- floodplains and,
- significant upland forests.

A city with foresight, Wilsonville also has a Heritage Tree Program it established in 2005. Each year, the city recognizes a tree or trees within city limits that is of special significance to the community, has unique qualities or a special link to history. Thus far, designated heritage trees include a Giant Sequoia in Memorial Park, and a large stand of Douglas fir in the heart of its Old Town residential area. The program serves as just another way to remind citizens of the importance of trees, and their role in cultural and community history.

Mayor looks back

Wilsonville mayor Charlotte Lehan was appointed to Wilsonville City Council in 1991, and elected mayor in 1996. In an interview with the Oregonian earlier this year, Lehan was quoted as saying "Mayor Krummel may have started the tree ordinance, but subsequent

Continued on page 12

councils and staffs have embraced it, expanding an urban forestry program that has become a national model.”

“I was on city council several years before becoming mayor,” recalled Lehan in an interview. It was during this time that Wilsonville passed its tree ordinance, although changes to it and public hearings took place before it was passed.

“Increasing our parking lot requirements was one of the big changes,” says Mayor Lehan, adding “we beefed up requirements — one tree per six parking spaces — to increase the density of trees.” Lehan says the city also increased the size of its tree wells to an 8-foot width, “which gives trees a better shot at survival in a parking lot.”

What about growth and development? When she started at City Council, the city had about 7,000 residents. It now has more than 17,000 residents, and its real market value has grown from \$600 million to \$2 billion.

“We sometimes run into conflicts with developers,” says Lehan, “but for the most part, the developers we work with really do try to lay out their development with trees in mind, trying to save the most significant trees,” she adds. That doesn’t mean there are never any problems. “We run into common problems like utility placement, roads, curbs and sidewalks, and the sorts of things that impact root zones,” says Lehhan. “We work on those on a case-by-case basis, and try to give the best trees the best chance.”

“And, developers are very happy when they look at their development and see that it includes mature trees,” she adds.

Always thinking ahead, last year the city even adopted a policy intended to encourage private property owners outside city limits to preserve significant natural resources — especially older trees—prior to annexation.



In Wilsonville’s Villebois community, use of water gardens, left, and rain gardens, right, allow rainwater to soak into soil creating a slower delivery of cleaner water into nearby rivers and waterways. Porous street pavers also help filter large amounts of water.

Words of wisdom

Asked if he had any advice for cities currently putting their first tree ordinance together, Neamtzu says he tells people to “be prepared with people to be able to implement and staff the ordinance.” That’s because a good tree ordinance usually necessitates working with planners and developers, plan implementation, mitigation and a host of other tasks associated with tree preservation, tree planting or tree maintenance.

So what’s the best way to get a new tree ordinance passed?

Ironically, Neamtzu says, it often takes a problem to develop before some cities will take action with an ordinance. Yet, oftentimes that’s just what happens — an “impetus moment” as Neamtzu describes it, will often motivate a city council to consider adopting a tree code that will help prevent future similar problems from occurring.

It’s clear town residents appreciate their local tree advocates. “When I ask people what they like most about Wilsonville,” says Lehan, “they usually mention three things: cleanliness, safety, and trees... Wilsonville’s trees are always in the top three answers.”

Mayor Lehan is currently running for Clackamas County Commissioner; many hope whoever fills her shoes will continue to enhance Wilsonville’s reputation as a little city with “tree champion” status. 🍷

◀ Large older trees like this one, left, preserved during homebuilding, provide residents with a sense of place, and pride.

“Whether it is a majestic 200-year old Oregon white oak, or a young flowering cherry, trees greatly contribute to the sense of place and quality of life in Wilsonville.”
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