

EFFECTING POLITICAL CHANGE IN URBAN FORESTRY

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The key word in this topic is ‘change’.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” Margaret Mead

WHY?

WHAT?

WHO?

HOW?

WHY DO WE WANT CHANGE? WHAT IS IT WE WANT TO CHANGE?

Well - attend TREENET or any other tree conference and you'll soon hear what it is people think should change. I'm confident that everyone at TREENET would like to see something changed.

In the latest edition of *The Australian Arbor Age* Peter Thyerⁱ summarises very succinctly the myriad of problems that inhibit achieving ‘best value’ urban forest, (Vol. 10 No. 2 Aug/Sept 2005, pp 26-28).

In brief, they are:

- Competition for space, above and below ground, including views;
- poor planning and management of trees;
- lack of community awareness of benefits provided by trees;
- risk and liability;
- inadequate research;
- inadequately regulated industry – either statutory regulation or self regulation;

WHAT ARE THE SOLUTIONS?

Peter Thyer advances some ideas about how to address the demise of urban forest.

The **what** that needs to happen!

We collectively have a vision of more and / or bigger, undoubtedly healthier and safer trees.

If you work in the section of local government that adjudicates tree removal to facilitate development you may want a decision-making framework that properly values trees.

If you work in the part of local government that maintains council's trees you want adequate funds to proactively manage the community assets which are council-owned trees.

We need funds for research so that we can develop a knowledge base comparable to other parts of the world.

We want a professional tree industry that provides best value service to the trees and to the community.

And I could go on, and you could add your own issues to the list of things that need to change. This presentation isn't about what needs to be changed so much as how to make that change happen.

WHO CAN MAKE CHANGE HAPPEN? WHO CAN INFLUENCE THE CHANGE?

Change. Effective change needs to happen at a cultural level, a change of understanding, a change of awareness, and maybe a change of beliefs.

Change ultimately needs to happen across the community. If the community doesn't accept the change, it is not sustainable.

I want to say a few words about our relationship with the community (acknowledging 'the community' is a very broad term).

The need to engage with other professions has often been spoken about – engineers, planners, road builders, utilities, developers, etc., both within the council and in the community. Also with other arms of the horticultural industry – nursery people, landscapers, etc.

The other sector of the community I believe we need to engage with is people in the community who criticise our decisions to remove trees.

I don't think there's a single person in this room who doesn't love trees. It's somewhat ironic then that the people who most often criticise us and publicly disagree with our decision about trees, are people who also love trees.

This was highlighted last year in Sydney when the Royal Society for the Botanic Gardens decided to remove some senescent figs. Arborists whom I admire and respect were involved in the decision to remove those trees, and stand by their decision. I understand and respect their decision. As a Green politician, I also know many of the people who protested and sat in the trees. I respect and support their action.

Who was right? Whatever one thinks about the situation, there was no black and white, right solution. People have different opinions, different values. That was why it was so hard.

Two points I feel are important to make are:

1. It is okay to disagree and have debate about individual situations and trees, and even principles, but we should remember we're basically all on the same side of the fence.
2. A lot of time is spent focussing on the individual situations, and we're not looking at the big picture. While the figs were being debated thousands of other trees disappeared across Sydney, many that possibly should not have gone and many that will not be replaced. I note the sub-title to the NSW LGA Urban Forest Policy – *Can't see the forest for the trees.*"

In summary, we need to work together and we need to focus on the big picture.

The developers, engineers, utilities, etc. have a fundamentally different view of how open space should be used. They are the people whose beliefs need to change.

People who want to retain trees and grow more trees are people who can support our vision for a best quality urban forest. Our work can and should complement one another's.

I will touch on strategies that the community can use to effect change because it is important that you know what they can do to support what you are doing and what you can do to support them.

HOW CAN WE CHANGE THINGS?

I worked as a tree officer in local government before and after being elected as a councillor. I have experienced and understand some of the difficulties that face tree officers in trying to change things.

I know that tree officers are extremely busy and there is never enough time to do everything one is meant to, let alone do extra to try and change things. It's a matter of balancing the important with the urgent.

- **IT WON'T JUST HAPPEN – IT REQUIRES EFFORT**
- **THERE WILL NEVER BE ENOUGH TIME – YOU MAY AS WELL DO IT NOW**

In Newcastle and in NSW we are working to make change.

In 2002 Phil Hewett and I collaborated in drafting an urban forest policy that I planned to have adopted by the Local Government Association of NSW. We needed permission of the council's General Manager to be able to work together. I then had to get it through Newcastle Council before it could even be considered at the state conference.

At the state conference it was the first time many people had heard the term, 'urban forest'. There was a bit of nervousness. It was referred to a working group (the LGA Urban Forest Policy Working Group) to review and make recommendations back to the following year's conference.

The recommendation from the working group was to adopt the draft policy with a few changes and to maintain the working group and charge it with the implementation of the policy.

Taking the extra year to have the policy adopted was frustrating at the time but in hindsight was a good thing. It allowed people time to get used to the concept, or at least the term 'urban forest'. The working group comprises both council tree officers as well as councillors (and a mayor). The President of the LGA and Mayor of North Sydney is also very supportive, as is the Lord Mayor of Sydney. A number of councils around NSW, particularly in Sydney, are thinking 'urban forest' rather than just 'urban trees'.

The working group has recently been allocated staff resources and will be looking for grants to undertake research and education over the next year. It's in the process of developing a brochure and a website.

In Newcastle I managed to divert sufficient money in the 04/05 budget to employ a person for a year to develop an urban forest policy for Newcastle. Luckily the person

employed was Phil and he has drafted the policy *Neighbourwoods:the Newcastle Urban Forest Action Plan 2006-2016*, about which you heard him speak yesterday. So, it's easy. All you arborists have to do is become a councillor.

Unfortunately, becoming a councillor isn't that easy in many places. And a single issue, urban forest platform isn't likely to get you elected. Believe me, you're not missing that much. I was elected anyway and 'urban forestry' has become my passion.

- **MAKE CHANGE – GET POLITICAL**

You don't need to be a councillor to make change! But you may need to get political. 'Political' doesn't mean joining a political party. It doesn't mean being involved with elections. It does involve communicating with people who make decisions and other people who influence decisions.

- Identify who can make the change you desire.

Very few individuals can make unilateral decisions about policy issues. State government ministers can, but the changes we're talking about will probably require council resolutions or changes to state legislation.

- Identify who influences the decision-makers.

Council senior management, advisors to ministers and state MPs, state planning department officers can influence the change we want.

As a council tree officer you cannot just go off and start lobbying councillors or state politicians.

However, an industry representative body can. It is independent. General industry associations, or specific local government tree associations such as NSW's Local Government Tree Resources Association are invaluable bodies to speak to people that cannot otherwise be spoken to. They are peak advisory bodies which provide greater credibility than a single person.

An association should develop a strategic plan – that tells everyone what that association wants and how it aims to get it.

Industry associations –

- can propose changes to legislation and /or policy
- can engage with councils, local government association, state government
- can give briefings to councils
- can develop education materials
- develop draft policy, models, standards, templates
- can speak to the media

Meanwhile, council officers can play a major role to support the initiatives of the association.

- In your own council
 - communicate with councillors, senior management, community
 - develop an internal newsletter to be distributed using existing council communication media
 - provide regular (annual) reports to council

- hold regular (fortnightly or monthly) meetings with your manager/s – convey issues, ideas, what has occurred
- use council's external communication media to provide articles for the public
- develop community consultative committees
- engage with and get to know people from other parts of council that influence or are influenced by tree management matters, eg planners, engineers, (email)
- make yourself relevant
- Participate in (or help start) the local government tree association
- Engage with community organisations that have an interest in tree management issues – attend meetings on the odd occasion to answer questions or advise issues
- Develop your skills
 - Publicity
 - Media

¹ Thyer, P., 2005. The Future for Trees in Sydney, *The Australian Arbor Age*, Vol.10 No. 2 Aug/Sept 2005, pp 26-28.
