

## **A Case Study in Urban Forestry and Electric Power Board Collaboration by Gene Hyde, City Forester, Chattanooga, Tennessee**

In many cities there exists an antagonistic relationship between the electric utility provider and the city arborist. In Chattanooga we are very proud to report that we have developed a different approach over the years. Relations between the City and the Electric Power Board (EPB) are based on cooperation and mutual respect. The hiring of a utility forester, Carl Absher, and a vegetation manager, Ray Davis, were important developments in this improved working relationship.

Poor pruning standards and less-than-effective customer relations had plagued the Electric Power Board (EPB) of Chattanooga for decades. In past years it was not uncommon to see stub cuts, roundovers, and massively topped trees. Today, clearance is achieved by pruning substations on an accelerated basis with a one- to two-year cycle. Only those trees that need to be pruned are touched, and this determination is made by an ISA Certified Arborist. Chattanooga's 600 square miles of service area includes 3,000 miles of lines. The pruning contract specifies ANSI A-300 and lateral pruning as the accepted standards.

Here are the most significant ways in which the City of Chattanooga Urban Forestry Program has coordinated and cooperated with the EPB:

1. In 2006 we piggybacked a contract with the EPB for pruning and removal services. This has worked out well for two reasons: first, we were able to achieve economy of scale by combining our contractual needs. We believe that we have a lower per-hour unit bid by combining our needs into one contract. Second, since the same contractor, Asplundh, provides crews for both the EPB and the City of Chattanooga, it works out well when a crew member from a power crew is assigned to our forestry crew. The individual does not drop in wages, so there is no resentment over unequal pay.
2. The EPB does not remove wood from their on-site tree removals, leaving piled wood that the customer must deal with. Older residents often have neither the physical strength nor the financial resources to dispose of such piles. Recognizing this reality, we have worked out an arrangement with the EPB so that the Public Works Department can schedule a large knuckleboom truck to pick up wood debris following a removal. This allows the EPB customers who are city residents to have a service performed seamlessly.
3. We have combined crews to do joint training for the following topics:
  - A. Certified arborist training
  - B. Electrical line hazard training
  - C. Bucket truck rescue
4. In 2006 and 2007 the EPB provided funding for our Tree Commission Annual Awards Banquet.
5. The EPB has adopted the standard of "lateral pruning" while pruning for line clearance.
6. The EPB requests permission from the City of Chattanooga for the removal of any tree on the ROW, and we rarely refuse these requests.
7. We notify the EPB when we see problems that are of concern to them.
8. We have agreed to share GIS info when we have compatible systems.
9. The City of Chattanooga has a plans review function for all new development within the city. Contractors and engineers are encouraged to sit through a one-hour "pre-submittal" conference with the review team that issues permits. Part of that review team is now our urban forestry

inspector, whose priority is to ensure that no large trees are scheduled for planting under distribution lines during the development and building phases. In this way we head off potential conflicts between the lines and trees.

10. Unfortunately the urban forestry department sometimes has budget shortfalls. When this occurs, the EPB graciously lets our contract crew work with them doing power line clearance until we get to the new fiscal year. This keeps our crew intact and gives the EPB some extra help in accomplishing their pruning goals.

11. We have established protocols for storm emergencies for the purpose of coordination and communication. City crews are not allowed to touch fallen trees that are tangled in distribution wires. Therefore it is imperative to work with EPB's troubleshooters and dispatchers to find out when it is safe to get to a fallen tree.

**The Utility Forester's Perspective:  
Comments from Carl Absher, Forester for the Electric Power Board**

In the past 37 years I have had the opportunity to work as a contractor in situations where the utility and city forestry department did not have a good relationship. After working with Gene Hyde for more than 16 years, I really cannot now understand how anyone does it differently. Ultimately, we all answer to the same customers, and we are all working to improve their quality of life. It is my opinion that our collaboration improves the attitudes and work quality of both of our work forces; our utility workers appreciate work quality and customer service, while Gene's guys better understand the increased hazards of high-voltage electricity and the volume of work that we must complete.

EPB's management is bold—a program used nowhere else except California. We studied Pacific Gas & Electric and modeled our trimming program after theirs—with the addition of a goal of 100% customer contact. We increased our customer notification to address the number one customer complaint that they did not know what was going to happen until they came home one day and found part of their tree gone. We have not yet achieved the goal of 100% contact. Around 7% of our customers will not call us back even after our planners leave doorhangers and phone messages.

One item that I would like to clarify is clearance—particularly, what is adequate or excessive clearance. It is a problem that I work with our contract crews and customers to address, and progress is very slow. Historically we trimmed each and every tree to a ten-foot clearance regardless of its species or position. Subsequently, slow-growing species were excessively trimmed, and fast-growing trees were inadequately trimmed. So, in our program, ten feet may not be enough clearance on a silver maple or a hackberry, but ten feet may be way too much on a white oak or a red cedar. The purpose of our program is to secure not a distance of clearance, but a time of clearance. We would like to secure three years of clearance on every tree pruned, and an arbitrary distance will not accomplish that.

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