

## Trees and Utilities

*Alexander Johnson, Senior Maintenance & Operations Manager for the City of Durham*

As resource professionals who specialize in navigating the intersection of people and trees, there is no more emblematic situation for us to encounter than the tree-utility conflict. It's a conflict that goes way back and gets at the crux of what we do as resource professionals as we manage expectations and advocate for best practices.

We understand that trees enhance our urban landscapes. What guarantees our employment is their tendency to grow all willy-nilly, with no respect to property lines, approach distances, or lines of sight.

The best treatment is benign neglect, just leave them alone and let them take care of themselves. Fortunately, (for us) sometimes professionals are needed to offer "assistance" to trees that find themselves at odds with our human rules and precepts.

Where we land on the spectrum of "assistance" -- from benign tree planting, watering, pruning and other "hugging" techniques to harvest, removal, utility pruning or other forms of "butchery" -- really depends on who signs your check, who your client is, and how they are inclined toward their trees.

There is even a tendency for folks in either camp (the huggers and the butchers) to question the integrity of their opposing peers. This is ultimately ill-informed and divisive, but we all have our stories about people behaving badly in playing out the extremes of these two stereotypes.

The bottom line for utility pruning is that tall trees and overhead electrical conductors can't be expected to share space. There is a highly charged (literally) space at the intersection of trees and wires, and nobody in their right mind wants to go anywhere near it. Unsurprisingly, when people take that job on, they don't always have the tree's best interest in mind. This is the point I try to lead with when visiting with a Durham resident as they regale me with tales of tree torture. That tree worker cares first and foremost about safety, all other considerations are lower on the list.

I often saw that alternatives do exist. We can bury all the wires, losing trees in the process, and making it harder to plant replacements over the buried



lines. It's also hugely expensive to demolish and dispose of all the functional existing infrastructure and then pay to put new stuff back. I often ask residents who insist on this option if they want the pad-mounted transformer in their front yard (they usually don't).

Conversely, the utility can simply eliminate all trees from under these wire networks and then aggressively police thousands of linear miles to enforce the tree ban in perpetuity. This dystopian alternative may be the ultimate in safety and reliability, but this is not a realistic or feasible goal.

What we end up with is a good old-fashioned compromise. We need to navigate those muddy waters of managing expectations while encouraging an evolving workforce to do better. We need to plant the next generation of urban trees from stock that can still provide benefits without putting some future tree worker in harm's way.