

What's Happening With the Trees?

A Report on the City of Beacon's Main Street Tree Planting Plan

Submitted by Naomi Sachs, Chair of the City of Beacon Main Street Tree Committee

Now that spring is (finally!) here, Beacon residents have been asking, "What's happening with the trees?" Here is an update on what the Beacon Main Street Tree Committee (MSTC) has been up to and what the plans are for our fair city's Main Street. The MSTC has worked hard to develop a plan that creates a safe, beautiful, and sustainable environment. Our goals were first and foremost to protect people's health, safety and welfare; second, to insure the health and longevity of all existing and proposed trees; and third, to further increase the social, economic, and environmental vitality of our Main Street, the mile-long green heart of Beacon that connects our two greatest natural assets, the Hudson River and Mount Beacon.

Here's what we have been up to:

The MSTC walked Main Street several times, noting tree and sidewalk conditions. Below are the problem areas we identified, and our recommended solutions.

1. Trees that were dead or dying. Recommendation: Removal and, in most cases, replacement.
2. Trees that needed pruning. Solution: Lou Sebesta (City Arborist) led us in developing the Beacon Main Street Tree Pruning Standards, which will be used by the City from now on. Lou also worked with Zep Thomaselli (Beacon Highway Supervisor) and other Highway Department crew on training about how and when to prune, and Zep and his crew have been working this spring on removing branches that are dead, dangerous, or too close to buildings. They have also been removing the dead and dying trees, saving the city significant cost by keeping the work "in-house."
3. Areas of heaving pavement from tree roots. Solution: Here we were able to keep many more mature trees than in the original 2007 plan by allowing for larger tree wells; in only a few cases, trees' roots are causing too much damage and the trees must be removed.
4. We also noted areas where new trees can be planted. Over the decades, as trees along Main Street have died, many of the empty wells have been simply paved over. This new plan adds trees to several bare stretches along Main Street, increasing our "urban forest."

The Tree Committee used the following criteria in our choice of the 5 proposed species (American hornbeam, honey locust, pin oak, scholar tree, and Japanese zelkova):

1. Trees that are deep-rooted to avoid sidewalk heaving. We will also be using Cornell Structural Soil (CSS) for all new plantings; trees planted with CSS in similar urban sidewalk situations tend to be healthier and to stay within

- their tree wells, thus reducing sidewalk heaving and infrastructure disturbance;
2. Trees that fare well in urban conditions, including salt, exhaust, small root zones, and compaction from foot traffic, and that are strongly branched and resistant to diseases and pests;
 3. Trees with majestic, rounded forms similar to those of the existing honey locusts, London planes, and Japanese zelkovas already on Main Street. Trees with this form can be easily pruned so they do not to interfere with pedestrian and vehicular traffic or adjacent buildings;
 4. Trees that create a harmonious visual scene while maintaining enough diversity of species to avoid “monoculture” problems (using all one species, as many cities did before the Dutch Elm Disease crisis, makes trees more susceptible to pests and diseases and leaves gaping holes if a species is affected);
 5. Trees with a variety of visual appeal: Some have attractive blossoms, others beautiful fall foliage, others all-around good form, and some even have all three!
 6. Three of the five trees species are native to North America; native flora provide food and habitat for our native birds and to continue Beacon’s commitment to being a “green” city, which includes using native plantings whenever possible.

These 5 tree species will be planted in groups of 1-2 blocks so that we have a sense of visual continuity whilst allowing for different areas along our diverse Main Street to have aesthetic variety and interest. Also in 2-3 block stretches, some tree wells will be top dressed with bark mulch and some with very fine gravel. Both of these top dressings are easy to maintain, and both can be planted with perennials, annuals, and bulbs by individual shop and building owners and residents (hint-hint!). But seriously, we really do hope that businesses will “adopt” their trees and sidewalks, tending to the area in front of their building by weeding, sweeping, watering, and even planting and caring for plants in the tree wells.

The Tree Committee decided against using tree grates for the rest of Main Street; they are less healthy for trees over a long period of time, and they also tend to collect trash, which is hard to get to without pulling up the entire tree grate.

The MSTC developed planting guidelines and specifications that are very specific and tree-friendly so that contractors know exactly what to do and will be held accountable if they do not follow the plans and specifications. This will insure the survival and longevity of our trees.

The City has given the green light for work to start, and Sunup, our very patient and capable contractor, will begin work in the next couple of weeks. As soon as we have the contractor’s work schedule, it will be announced and publicized so that Main Street business owners, residents, and shoppers are prepared in advance for construction.

I would like to thank the many Beacon citizens who stood up and voiced their concerns about the original plan in 2007, including the initial “Ad Hoc Beacon MSTC” and especially the three members who stayed on to form the core MSTC group: Lou Sebesta, Susan Wisniewski (Landscape Architect), and John Russo (City Engineer). They have put in countless hours on this project with their expertise and (volunteered) hard work. Also many, many thanks to Zep Thomaselli, Mayor Steve Gold, Councilman Randy Casale, and others who walked Main Street with us and helped with logistical questions and issues. We have maintained an open dialog and positive working relationship with business owners, residents, city council and staff members, and our mayor, and we hope that our work translates into a plan that people are happy with for a long, long time. If all goes according to plan, we will certainly have earned our “Tree City USA” designation this year. See you on Main Street!

Naomi Sachs, MLA, ASLA
Chair, Beacon Main Street Tree Committee
845.264.2026