

Official Procedure



CITY OF GAINESVILLE

Policy and Procedures to Manage Risk in the Urban Forest

Purpose:

Gainesville strives to eliminate in a timely fashion any tree deemed hazardous. Priority is placed on removing trees that carry the highest risk.

Court decisions have established that municipalities are not negligent in failing to remove trees that have fallen and caused damage or injury when there is no evidence that the government's inspection program was negligently designed or carried out, or that the tree had been deemed an imminent hazard and was not removed.

City of Gainesville Inspection Program:

The annual general inspection program surveys 20-25% of the streets for tree hazards. Every four to five years, every street has been looked at. This is the Windshield Risk Assessment (WRA). Tree evaluation in parks is on-going. Staff working in City parks are cautioned to be aware of tree hazards and to contact the City Arborist when they have questions about the health of individual trees.

City staff qualified to perform WRA inspections are those whose job descriptions require possession of current professional certification by the International Society of Arboriculture. Employees performing the WRA have received formal training in assessing tree hazards and they have experience with the care of mature trees. Three years is suggested as a guideline.

When a tree branch falls into the street, the condition of the tree is assessed by the responding tree crew supervisor. Not every tree that drops a limb is hazardous. However, if other symptoms and signs of serious decline are present, a Visual Tree Assessment (VTA) is completed. The VTA documents the condition of the tree and motivates further regular inspection until the tree is either removed from the list because it can be considered safe or until it declines to the point at which it is removed.

Windshield Risk Assessment (WRA)

The procedure is to give a cursory review of all trees on paved rights-of-way as shown on a quarter section map. It is a fact that all trees have inherent risk, and any tree can fail under certain conditions. The goal of the WRA is to

toward a large undeveloped area would not be considered an imminent hazard to the public. Were it leaning toward the street, the target would be pedestrians, vehicles or bicyclists, so the hazard would require immediate abatement. Immediate hazards identified in the WRA should receive a priority "2" rating according to the Policy on Requests for Work by the City Tree Maintenance Team, unless the immediate danger is so great that it is considered an emergency, in which case the priority is "1" and a bucket truck crew is called off their existing assignment and dispatched immediately.

Note: The University of Florida estimated 3 million trees within Gainesville's City limits (2005). To individually provide a thorough evaluation of each of the 30,000 street trees is beyond the level of service the City can provide. The purpose of the WRA is to identify and abate clearly visible, obvious imminent dangers. At this time resources do not permit even a cursory evaluation of undeveloped rights-of-way and unpaved alleys. These are often fenced and treated as private property. It is not feasible to include them in the WRA. However, individual trees called to the attention of staff may be evaluated via a VTA and maintained on the list.

Visual Tree Assessment (VTA)

The City of Gainesville Tree Advisory Board and the City Arborist developed the VTA as an instrument for evaluating hazards in individual trees. It summarizes information included in *A Photographic Guide to the Evaluation of Hazard Trees in Urban Areas* (Matheny and Clark, 1994, International Society of Arboriculture) into a check list that assures the evaluator will look carefully for defects in the root crown, trunk, major limbs, and branches. An "Explanation of Risk Assessment Evaluation Data" was developed at the same time and should be consulted in completing the VTA form. The check list and explanation have been adopted as standard parts of tree programs in many communities. The information was published in the April 2007 issue of the International Society of Arboriculture publication, *Arborist News*.

The VTA form is completed on trees requiring a thorough assessment of risk. Examples of reasons for this could be:

- A broken branch fell in road, resulting in immediate dispatch to clear the street. The tree is not so badly damaged that it must be removed immediately, but symptoms of decline are evident. The information generated on the VTA helps make decisions on which trees on the right-of-way should be removed and documents that City staff gave careful consideration to all aspects of the tree.
- Repeated complaints from a resident about the health of a tree, accompanied by threats of a lawsuit would motivate this level of documentation.