

The trouble with trees? Social and political dynamics of greening efforts in Detroit, Michigan



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Between 2011 and 2014, 24 percent of residents in Detroit eligible for a free street tree submitted a “no-tree request” (NTR) to a non-profit organization responsible for tree planting on city-owned property. With tree canopy of the city at around 20 percent, and a goal to greatly increase the canopy to improve the health of the region’s environment and people, it is critical to understand citizens’ views on residential tree planting.

This executive summary describes research conducted between July 2015 and May 2016 that examined perspectives of city residents eligible to receive a street tree in Detroit, Michigan. Residents who received tree and submitted NTR were asked about the benefits and costs of tree planting, and current and desired involvement in street tree planting programs. Citizens’ responses were compared with perspectives of relevant staff, volunteers, and board members within the non-profit organization.

Research questions:

1. How do participants frame the problem(s) with street tree planting efforts in Detroit?
2. What are the historical, cultural, political, and ecological factors that contribute to differing frames among participants regarding street tree planting in Detroit?
3. What are participants’ perspectives on appropriate solutions to these problems?

Methods:

Residents: Residents in five neighborhoods with a low, average, or high proportion of “no-tree requests” submitted were sampled. Data were collected via community meetings, audio-recorded interviews, phone conversations, door-to-door dialogue, and questionnaires. Forty-three residents were interviewed, and 41 completed questionnaires (primarily those who did not participate in interviews completed questionnaires).

Non-profit organization: The lead researcher engaged in four tree planting events, a green infrastructure committee meeting, two board meetings, audio-recorded interviews with 14 staff and board members, four community outreach events, and several office interactions.

Key results:

1. “No-tree requests” do not measure satisfaction with tree-planting

Although half of the residents interviewed received trees, only one-third were happy with the tree they received. The other two-thirds of residents did not want a tree (primarily due to maintenance concerns) or wanted a tree under conditions of greater decision-making involvement in species selection and/or assistance with tree maintenance, which sometimes included removal of dead standing trees. The number of “no-tree requests” received is one measure used to determine the success of tree planting, which only captures the views of some residents.

2. Those who submitted “no-tree requests” are aware of benefits of trees

Of 27 residents who provided a response on the benefits of planting trees, the most commonly noted positive impacts of trees by those who received trees and those who submitted “no-tree requests” included: beautification (19), shade (16), and oxygen produced (12). Less noted benefits included generally helping the environment (3) and the community (3), wildlife habitat (2) and CO₂ capture (2).

- Residents and those within the non-profit organization overlapped in almost all benefits associated with trees, except storm water management which was only mentioned by the non-profit organization respondents.
- Based upon this data, it does not appear that submission of a “no-tree request” is motivated by an overall lack of understanding of benefits provided by trees.

3. Residents apply these benefits to a range of tree species, and consider perceived maintenance costs in forming opinions about tree planting

Benefits voiced by residents overlapped with some important goals for the program noted by the organization’s staff (e.g. increased air quality). However, residents sometimes associated these benefits with different types of trees than what the organization plants.

- For example, one resident wanted shade “as long as it ain’t no 60-foot tree.”
- Some residents preferred flowering trees which are “easier to control.”
- The organization’s staff selects which species of trees to plant, and preferred shade trees to provide greater ‘ecosystem services’ like storm water runoff mitigation.
- Staff members informed residents that the organization would maintain the trees for the first three years, which was the extent of dialogue on tree care with residents.

4. Neighborhood upkeep is important, and related to response to tree planting

Residents noted the city’s economic decline, increase in vacant properties and decrease in city services, which created difficulties in maintaining neighborhood appearance and social cohesion to varying degrees. These experiences related to perspectives on tree planting.

Those who were happy to accept a tree indicated:

- Fewer issues with trees
- Past tree issues that were dealt with by the city
- A lack of trees, and received assurance that trees planted would not be “large”
- More individual resources for tree care and/or had positive experiences with nature

Those who did not want a tree, or wanted more assistance and/or choice, identified:

- Greater challenges with neighborhood property upkeep
- Disappointing results from lack of involvement in actions that affect neighborhood appearance and function
 - “I tried to get the city to trim trees almost 15 years and they never came out.”
- Fewer resources to help address maintenance issues
 - One resident wanted a choice of tree species because, “Even though it’s the city property...we’re gonna end up having to care for it and raking leaves and God knows whatever else we might have to do.”

5. The challenge of tree maintenance requires collaboration

Non-profit organization: The difficulty of maintaining trees based on the culture of funding non-profit environmental groups came through in interviews with the organization’s staff:

- “I think that it’s really sexy to plant trees and fundable to plant trees but it’s not sexy to maintain or to monitor those trees.”

Residents: During follow-up focus groups, a willingness to help care for trees and desire for information on tree care was expressed by residents in two communities with differing proportions of “no-tree requests” (NTR) submitted (n=41):

Information residents would like	Proportion of respondents
1. What to expect with the tree’s root growth over time	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 55% (High NTR)• 52% (Average NTR)
2. How to care for the tree	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 55% (High NTR)• 40% (Average NTR)
3. Who to contact if something is wrong with the tree	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 55% (High NTR)• 44% (Average NTR)
4. Who will care for the tree and how?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 36% (High and Average NTR groups)
5. What will the tree look like over time?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 36% (High NTR)• 24% (Average NTR)

Recommendations:

1) Provide more detailed information relevant to residents’ concerns and values

- Specifically, provide information about anticipated appearance and maintenance needs over time (e.g. watering, pruning) for various tree species to facilitate selection of species that achieve mutual goals, and discussion of a *collaborative* maintenance plan.

2) Offer choice of tree species, within parameters of what is ecologically appropriate and financially feasible. Species selection is not a zero-sum game.

- Shared decision-making power in species selection with residents will help to gain greater support for proposed tree planting, and identify species that achieve important shared goals (i.e. beauty, shade, air quality). Improving the tree canopy is a **social movement**. A key element that impacts citizen involvement in and support of these movements is a sense of agency or power to act on the issue to achieve a valued goal.

3) Follow up with residents, and broaden indicators of success

- A mechanism for following up with residents at intervals after tree planting is advised to encourage long term tree stewardship. Partner with academic institutions to provide hands-on learning in community engagement for forestry students. Use this activity to measure broader indicators of success, like resident satisfaction with tree planting.

Have more questions about this study? Please contact me:

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