

Community Leaders' Perceptions of Urban Forests in Hillsborough County, Florida¹

Francisco Escobedo, Jennifer A. Seitz, Rob J. Northrop, Molly K. Moon²

Community involvement in the effort to protect and manage city trees is important to ensure that the urban forest continues to thrive and to contribute to the well-being of the public. Research shows that trees can provide a wide range of ecosystem services such as improving air and water quality, reducing energy use costs and improving the urban climate. Urban forests can even increase property values and attract shoppers. Understanding the public's beliefs and attitudes toward trees will assist county managers, planners, extension agents, arborists, and foresters in working with the community to promote urban forests. In this fact sheet, we will compare the results from a needs assessment in Hillsborough County to a national urban tree survey and share some initial insights into community perceptions and beliefs regarding urban trees in one county along Florida's Gulf Coast.

Results from a stakeholder analysis and two nominal group meetings with urban and suburban Hillsborough County residents concerning their perceptions of urban forests were used to design a countywide survey that was mailed to 641 homeowner association (HOA) leaders across Hillsborough County in the summer of 2007 (Northrop and others 2007). The mailing list was provided by the Hillsborough County Community Relations Office. The HOA leaders were asked a series of questions concerning their perceptions and attitudes about the benefits as well as concerns for having urban forests in their communities. An urban forest was

defined as the trees along streets and in yards, woodlands, forests and natural areas found in and around places such as neighborhoods, cities and towns.

The 24% of HOA leaders responding to the survey listed the top benefits of urban forests recorded in Table 1. A recent national survey of urban residents by researchers from Washington State University asked 2,004 homeowners about their attitudes concerning urban trees (Lohr and others 2004). Table 1 compares the responses from both surveys.

The outcome of the Hillsborough County survey suggests that HOA leaders perceive the same costs of trees in cities as urban residents nationally (Lohr and others 2004), except that Hillsborough County HOA leaders listed hurricane damage from trees as a cost and did not list allergies as a cost. When it came to assessment of the benefits of urban forests, however, HOA leaders in Hillsborough County mostly differed from national residents. Only about shade benefits did the Hillsborough County HOA leaders and the national residents agree.

When asked about the value of trees to their life, Floridians listed relaxing, solitude from everyday life, and opportunities to experience nature. While the national study did not ask for specific reasons why participants feel trees are

1. This document is FOR194, one of a series of the School of Forest Resources and Conservation Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. This fact sheet was first published as part of Changing Roles: Wildland-Urban interface professional Development Program. Revised for EDIS July 2008. Reviewed June 2011. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
2. Francisco Escobedo, assistant professor, School of Forest Resources and Conservation; Jenny Seitz, Project Learning Tree State Coordinator; Robert Northrop, Urban and Community Forester, Hillsborough County Extension Office; And Molly K. Moon, PhD candidate, Interdisciplinary Ecology, School of Natural Resources and Environment Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.

of value, 83% of those surveyed indicated that trees were important to their quality of life (Lohr and others 2004).

When Hillsborough County survey respondents were asked, “What were your sources for tree care information?” they responded:

This additional result can be used to determine venues for providing information to homeowners on proper care and maintenance of urban forests.

Although limited, this survey could indicate that Hillsborough County Florida HOA leaders’ reasons for having trees in urban areas are similar to those of citizens elsewhere in the United States. However, Hillsborough County respondents indicated a greater concern for hurricane damage to and from trees. Differing beliefs and attitudes toward trees frequently give rise to challenges in managing and dealing with urban forests. These preliminary results are in line with many recent experiences by people working in urban forests in Florida. The results highlight the need to educate people on proper species selection, site design, plant quality, and the benefits as well as costs of urban trees. This information could be used to provide local governments with information on HOA and possibly community leaders’ perceptions about urban forests.

Moon, M. 2007. Community perceptions and attitudes toward urban forests. Unpublished raw data.

Northrop, R., F. Escobedo, and J. Seitz. 2007. An urban forestry needs assessment for rapidly urbanizing Florida – assessing community perceptions and attitudes toward urban and urbanizing forests. In *Emerging Issues Along the Urban/Rural Interface 2: Linking Land Use Science and Society Conference Proceedings*, ed. D. N. Leband, 180-181. Auburn, AL: Auburn University Center for Forest Sustainability.

Literature Cited

Lohr, V.I., C.H. Pearson-Mims, J. Tarnai, and D.A. Dillman. 2004. How urban residents rate and rank tree benefits and problems associated with trees in cities. *Journal of Arboriculture* 30: 28–35.

Table 1. Comparison of Urban Tree Perceptions of Hillsborough County, Florida Homeowner Association Leaders and Urban Residents in a National Study Ranked in Order of Importance.

Hillsborough County Survey ¹	National Survey ²
Benefits of Urban Trees	
1. Improve aesthetics	1. Tree shading and cooling of buildings
2. Provide shade	2. People feel calmer
3. Increase property values	3. Reduce smog and dust
4. Provide unique community character	4. Noise reduction
Costs of Urban Trees	
1. Hurricane damage from trees	1. Allergies
2. Falling branches and trees on power lines	2. Block signage
3. Tree damage to sidewalks, roads and foundations	3. Cause cracks in the sidewalk
4. Block signage	4. Damage to power lines
From: ¹ Moon, M. 2007.; ² Lohr, V.I., C.H. Pearson-Mims, J. Tarnai, and D.A. Dillman. 2004.	