

MTWFA TREE WARDEN EXCHANGE:

REPORTS FROM THE PIONEERS

A DAY IN BOSTON WITH GREG MOSMAN

By Andrew DeSantis, MCA, City of Chelsea

A DAY IN CHELSEA WITH ANDY DESANTIS

By Greg Mosman, MCA, City of Boston

Greg had told me that the day starts at 7 a.m., so I leave my house just before 6 a.m. in order to avoid the morning rush into Boston. On my journey I travel over the Tobin Bridge, along Storrow Drive to Park Drive, and then on to the parkways of Frederick Law Olmsted's Emerald Necklace: the Riverway, Jamai-caway, and Arborway.

This was the way to Grandma's house. As I travel, I am thinking of half a life ago, of my father and grandmother. They both passed a little more than thirty years ago and I am now 61. My father's family moved to the corner of Hyde Park Avenue and Walk Hill Street in Forest Hills around 1920. The house was a short distance from what I think would have been then (and still are) the most heavily forested sections of the City of Boston, including Forest Hills Cemetery, the Arnold Arboretum, and Franklin Park. Dad would take my brother and me to Grandma's house, and sometimes he would take us to the arboretum to play. Several times, we went with him to White Stadium in Franklin Park to watch Thanksgiving Day football games between Boston English and Boston Latin.

My destination today is once again Franklin Park, now the location of the Parks Maintenance and Tree Divisions of the City of Boston Public Works Department. I am looking for Greg Mosman, Tree Warden for the City of Boston, Superintendent of its Tree Division, a Massachusetts Certified Arborist, and an experienced climber. He lives in the Brighton section of Boston, is married to a registered nurse, and has three children under the age of 5 including 4-year-old twins and a ten-month-old baby. He is also a triathlete.

I pull in to the facility just as the operation is coming to life and inquire where I can find Greg. I am directed to the rear portion of the yard behind the horse corral where the forestry equipment is parked. I park next to the corral and, seeing a truck pull in, I get out and intro-

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Chelsea. Chelsea? This was my reaction when Dave Lefcourt told me that Andy DeSantis, Assistant DPW Director from the City of Chelsea, had elected to come to Boston as part of the Tree Warden Exchange Program. It's not that I had an opinion of Chelsea, or any preconceived notion of what it was like, it's just that it occurred to me I knew next to nothing about the small city that is sandwiched between two Boston neighborhoods, Charlestown and Eastie (East Boston for the non-initiated). What I did know is that to get from Charlestown to Eastie without using a tunnel you need to cut through Chelsea, and there is a large expanse of produce wholesalers on that road. Lucky for me the DPW maintenance yard is also on the same road!

I met Andy at the maintenance facility, where he handed me an itinerary of what we would be doing and seeing for the day. I'll take this opportunity to point out that Andy is an engineer and thus very well organized. He sent me detailed questions before our initial meeting, and

he took notes and pictures throughout his day in Boston, so the Chelsea itinerary he set up was not a surprise. I only mention this because I am the polar opposite. My days are not very organized, I have a lot of balls in the air, and plans can change several times throughout the day. The best way to describe my typical workday would be 'controlled chaos.'

Our first stop would be City Hall. On the way he explained some of the history that had shaped the city, including two major fires. The first "Great Chelsea Fire" occurred in 1908 when half the city burned; the second in 1973 burned eighteen city blocks. My first impression was that the city with its old brick buildings and strange roadway patterns looked very familiar to me, not unlike many of the urban neighborhoods of Boston or the Wattertown/Cambridge area where I grew up.

City Hall is a beautiful old building, nothing like the monstrosity that Boston calls "The Hall." We met with

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duce myself to the driver, Max Ford-Diamond, General Foreman of Greg's crew of four. We go to the office, where we meet a couple of other crewmembers just beginning the day. The office is located in a 114-year-old brick building with many of the original wood trims still in place, but fully functional for today with modern office equipment. Everyone is friendly and welcoming to a fellow tree worker.

Max tells me that the City of Boston will plant 1300 trees this year, including 475 starting right now. The City of Boston plants trees both in the sidewalk of public ways and on private front lawns as allowed in Section 7 of M.G.L. Chapter 87. Owners of private property where city trees are planted sign an agreement that gives the city the ownership of the tree for two years after it is planted. Max had just returned from a nursery in New Jersey where he tagged individual trees with Boston's own tags. Most of the planting work is contracted.

Greg comes in and we sit in his office and talk about budgets, constituent requests, call taking and their work order tracking system. Anyone can start a work order: one of the two office personnel in the Forestry office; any one of the ten call takers in City Hall; any resident or property owner; and anyone through a web-based service request using a graphical user interface on the City of Boston website. The Forestry Division typically receives a couple of requests every workday for immediate tree work and five hundred tree planting requests a year. The Forestry Division spent \$765,000 on contracted removals, pruning, trimming, stump grinding and other tree work in FY13, out of a \$1,500,000 division budget.

Our attention turns to the Massachusetts House of Representative's House Bill 1842, An Act to Update the Public Shade Tree Law, Chapter 87. I am a little surprised by it. I probably wasn't paying attention when it was brought up at the annual conference. I think the proposed revisions make the law more practicable.

We then start a tour of various locations to view some of today's work, ongoing work, and trees scheduled for removal with public hearings past and present. We drive by a large white ash tree that Greg thinks is the largest of the species in the city.

Our first stop is Howes Playground Park on Moreland Street. Northern Tree Service is performing clearance

trimming, pruning, and crown cleaning around the park. Greg converses with Northern's foreman about what he expects to be done today.

We move on to a residential location on Centerville Park, Dorchester where a property owner has requested a tree removal in order to construct a new curb cut for a driveway. The homeowner is just



Greg Mosman and property owner, Centerville Park

about to get in his vehicle when Greg introduces himself and tells him why we are there. We measure the diameter of the tree, a 25" littleleaf linden. We inform the petitioner that there would be a \$7,500 replacement charge for the tree, but that he would not be charged the removal cost if removal is approved at the scheduled Chapter 87 public hearing. The tree in question is blocking planned access for the driveway and it had lifted the sidewalk, creating a trip hazard.

Next stop is a large 150-year-old elm tree in the area of



Elm tree, Thomas Park

Thomas Park, South Boston. The elm has a substantial cavity near the base, it has lifted the adjacent brick sidewalk, and its trunk leans severely out into the roadway. A resident had requested its removal to make way for a new driveway. The tree warden had assessed the tree and scheduled a hearing for its removal. There were objections at the hearing, the decision was adjudicated, and the result was a permanent injunction against the City of Boston removing the tree. This tree was the subject of a story in the *Boston Globe* of September 19, 2013.

We proceed to another stop on Summer Street in the Fort Point Channel area, where tree removal hearings

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are scheduled due to the city's plans to make roadway and sidewalk improvements. Some of the younger trees will be planted in new locations, and new plantings here are part of the street improvement project.

We stop next at the Olmsted-designed Copps Hill Terrace Park in the North End of Boston. Barrett Tree Service East had completed



Norm and Chris Helie in front of elm bark beetle trap hung on a blue atlas cedar on the Boston Common

some work here about a month ago, taking out some vine growth from the terraces of granite block in an area of difficult access due to the steep terraces. At the top level of the park we observe some linden trees needing work. We walk over to the Foster Street play area, where some trees had recently been removed. It doesn't look much like a play area, as it is all broken concrete pavement and used for resident parking.

On to another Olmsted jewel, Boston Common. We catch up with Norm and Chris Helie, who for the last two years have been working on an elm bark beetle trapping and monitoring program on the Common, in the Public Garden, and on the Commonwealth Avenue Mall. Elm trees comprise twenty percent of the tree population on the Boston Common, with substantial elm populations also in the Public Garden, on the Commonwealth Avenue Mall, and in other areas of the city.

From the Boston Common we travel a short distance over to the Beacon Hill area around the Massachusetts State House. Greg shows me a few locations of some bare root plantings and explains the details of working in a neighborhood where luminaries like Secretary of State John Kerry and his wife reside and there is a plethora of neighborhood advisory and regulatory groups for beautification and historic preservation.

Boston's 2008-2014 Open Space Plan divides the City into 15 different neighborhood areas. (Each one of these areas could be bigger than the entire City of

Chelsea!) Most of these neighborhoods have at least one citizen advocacy group; some have many. Greg and I discuss his interaction with the Beacon Hill Garden Club and his successful efforts to gain the club's support for more tree plantings on the area's historical streets. Some groups such as the Friends of Boston Garden provide funding for upkeep of the trees located in their area of interest.

We drive down the Commonwealth Avenue Mall to the Kenmore Square area and stop for some delicious barbeque near Fenway Park. Preparations are well under way for tonight's final World Series game. I remark to Greg how the foliage in the downtown areas is still mostly green and at Franklin Park it is at fall peak color. We wonder if the difference is due to the heat island effect of the city.

After lunch we make a quick trip through the Victory Garden area of the Fenway and continue our journey along the Emerald Necklace's Riverway and Jamaica-caway. Not far from the historic residence of former Boston Mayor James Michael Curley, we stop to walk around a small kettle pond called Wards Pond, little known even though it is only a stone's throw from Jamaica Pond. Both ponds served as part of the early

19th century



Wards Pond

drinking water supply for the City of Boston. Greg shows me one of the trees that were vandalized last year for their valuable wood burls.

We return to the park maintenance headquarters at Franklin Park and I bid my leave. Greg has some emails to answer and I want to make my way back across Boston before the streets get busy with World Series traffic.

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A rewarding experience

I greatly enjoyed going around Boston with Greg. Boston is 25 times larger than the City of Chelsea (over 48 square miles vs. less than 2 square miles). Greg is responsible for over 37,000 trees on public property; I am responsible for about 2,000 trees on public ways. I expected that Greg would have a crew of a couple of dozen personnel; he has only four. Chelsea does not have a dedicated tree crew. We have a street crew of seventeen whose duties include tree activities as well as other typical duties of a Public Works Department, but not including sewer and water, solid waste collection, traffic signal and street light maintenance, fleet maintenance, or roadway or sidewalk reconstruction.

Tree care is only a small portion of my duties as Assistant Director of Public Works, and I am sure that my work load generated by tree care duties is minimal compared to Greg's work load. An example of this would become vividly clear on the two days after my visit, Halloween and the day after. Winds picked up to such an extent that Chelsea received several storm warnings from our contracted weather service provider, and I received alerts from National Grid on my smart phone. Chelsea received a handful of calls concerning tree fall. I am sure Boston received many dozens of service requests.

I depend a lot on web resources like the Massachusetts Tree Wardens' and Foresters' Association newly updated website and the websites of the Arbor Day Foundation and the Tree Care Alliance; Len Phillip's Urban Forestry Group on LinkedIn; and subscriptions to online newsletters such as About.com/Forestry. I never thought to look to the City of Boston. Chelsea's infrastructure is similar to Boston's: the water distribution and sewer collection system dating back 150 years, cobblestone roadway paving underlying a lot of the bituminous concrete street paving, etc. In researching this article, I found many useful things on Boston's urban forestry webpage that I plan to emulate on the Chelsea website. The Boston department's web address is www.cityofboston.gov/parks/streettrees/.

Working with and learning about trees is an enjoyable part of my workload. Perhaps if I had started in the practice of forestry at the beginning of my career rather than near the end of it, I could see myself in a position like Greg's in a big city. 🌳

several of Andy's co-workers and supervisors including Joe Foti, the DPW Director, and Jay Ash, the City Manager. I found it interesting that we could visit most of the city government under one roof, in under an hour, whereas the system I am used to dealing with is spread out over multiple buildings and agencies.

Next on our itinerary was a ride to see the various neighborhoods of the city. If you're not "from here," it may be hard to understand how a city like Chelsea, with an area of only 2 square miles, can have so many neighborhoods! I counted at least five and I'm sure I missed a few. I would imagine that the boundaries of the different neighborhoods are not really concrete and can change to suit real estate and developer needs. At any rate, the neighborhoods of Chelsea range from brownstone row houses to old Victorians to housing developments. Even though it is one of America's most densely populated cities, it didn't really have the feel of being overpopulated. We discussed how urban centers are changing with more wealthy people moving back to cities, especially to neighborhoods that were traditionally working class, blue-collar places. We may have tossed around the word "yuppie" just a bit.

I was surprised to see so many large shade trees, many on private property, but also as street trees and in schoolyards. The highlight for me was a massive American elm on the street near Washington Park. We looked at several specimen trees throughout the day, and I took the opportunity to offer my opinion as to what I thought would be the best management strategies for each. It turns out Andy and I have both been using Barrett Tree Service East quite a bit. They are a medium sized company based in Somerville that does top quality work, in what I would call extreme urban environments, so it makes sense that we both found our way to them.

In my job, as I suspect for most city arborists, there is crossover between public works sidewalk engineers, roadway engineers, architects, water and sewer infrastructure, street lighting, and anything or anyone else that could conflict with a tree. The interesting thing about Andy is that he wears many of those hats for his city. We talked at great length about ADA standards, storm water runoff, roadway reconstruction, cemetery management, all things about which I have a peripher-

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al knowledge but Andy is an expert. I really tried to take advantage of his expertise in the short time we spent together.

I had an awesome experience with the Tree Warden Exchange Program, and I'm just going to throw it out there now, that I am all in if anyone is so inclined to visit me next year. I found it to be educational and enjoyable, mostly because I got to know Andy better; I think we had met in passing a few times prior to the exchange. We have many common interests including cycling and, of course, trees. He is a super nice guy with a wealth of knowledge, and I think it's awesome that I have another tree warden to add to the list of people I can call for sound advice in the municipal arena.

Thank you MTWFA, Andy DeSantis MCA, and the City of Chelsea for this opportunity.

P.S. Everyone should visit Chelsea at least once to eat steak tips at the New Bridge Café, seriously, thank me later. 🍴