

The value of our street trees by the APA Committee

Here in Artarmon, we are lucky to have a combination of street trees, remnant bushland in the drainage reserves and a number of parks which, in combination, play a central role in contributing to the urban landscape. And indeed, the well established street trees and other vegetation are very much a part of what makes the character of the conservation area on the eastern side of the train station.

But what happens when these streetscapes are altered or even destroyed? Perhaps some trees are removed with permission from Council for a development to take place, or you come home to find that trimming of vegetation around electricity wires has changed the shape of the trees outside your house irretrievably. Is it only then that we value the contribution of trees in our streets?

Environmental benefits

Governments around the world, including our local Willoughby Council, recognise that trees benefit urban areas in many valuable ways.

Trees provide a natural cooling effect through shading and evaporation of water from soil and leaves, helping to moderate and reduce ultraviolet radiation by forming a protective physical barrier against the sun's rays. They act as a buffer against strong winds, and produce oxygen by taking carbon dioxide out of the air, combining it with water and releasing the oxygen back into the air.

By taking in carbon dioxide and storing carbon, trees help us reduce one of the major greenhouse gases responsible for global warming. They help manage stormwater run-off and soil erosion: during rain, water that is detained on the large surface area of leaves and branches in the tree canopy does not have to be handled immediately by the local drainage system. The soil beneath trees also absorbs water, reducing the volume of run-off. When there is run-off, tree roots prevent soil erosion by physically anchoring the soil in place. Trees also provide habitat for local wildlife.

Street tree pruning and maintenance

Essentially, any tree with a height exceeding 4 metres or a crown spread exceeding 3 metres is covered by the Willoughby Council Tree

and Bushland Preservation Order (TPO). This Order also applies to street trees, including those on the nature strips outside residential properties. It is WCC council's policy that pruning of street trees can only be carried out by council staff under the direction of Council's Open Space Manager. Council will only remove street trees if they are dead, dying or hazardous, or where the tree is causing damage to adjacent structures and there is no other viable management option.

Recently, WCC passed a motion, moved by Councillor Kate Lamb, that "Council adopt a policy of public notification where it intends to remove a tree/trees located in a public area/place for which it is responsible for maintenance/management". This new policy will soon see a notice being affixed to any affected tree – similar to the DA notice process for residential properties – in addition to the letter box drop of the immediate area which has been the procedure to date.

Electricity wires and street trees

The notable exception to the TPO is pruning work carried out by EnergyAustralia or its nominated sub-contractors. Recently, many trees on both the eastern and western sides of the railway line have been pruned and are unsightly at best, but possibly even unstable at worst. EnergyAustralia is not required to achieve an aesthetically pleasing result, or to trim another part of the tree already the required distance from the lines, to make the pruning even.

In residential areas, the vegetation safety clearance for low voltage overhead wires is 1.5 metres; for power poles, 2 metres. Trees may be trimmed further than this if an 'allowance for regrowth' is also added. If trees are within 3 metres of powerlines, only EnergyAustralia authorised workers can carry out trimming.

While Councils also have the option of installing aerial bundled cable (ABC) - one single insulated cable rather than 4 low voltage wires - the replacement cost is \$4000-\$7000 per span. WCC had a program of ABC replacement some years ago, with costs being shared equally between the Council and EnergyAustralia, but as Julie Whitfield, Council's Open Space Manager, comments: "EnergyAustralia places a very low priority on the ABC program – they won't allow contrac-



tors to do it, it has to be their own staff, and it became too difficult and time inefficient to keep trying to work with them".

Planting the correct street trees

WCC's publication 'Street Tree Management in Willoughby' points out that street trees are Council's responsibility, and for landscape management and legal liability reasons, street trees should only be planted by Council. However, because Council wants to encourage initiatives to beautify the landscape, residents can forward requests for street plantings, and Council will support neighbourhood and community groups in street planting projects.

Street trees are extremely valuable assets which provide a broad range of environmental and aesthetic benefits to our communities, and help to create a strong sense of place. Perhaps we only realise how much benefit they bring when they are no longer there.

For more information:

'Willoughby Tree and Bushland Preservation Order', and 'Street Tree Management in Willoughby', both from www.willoughby.nsw.gov.au

'Trees and Powerlines', www.energyaustralia.com.au

North Sydney Council report on Urban Forest at www.northsydney.nsw.gov.au/resources/documents/IOSE0151.pdf

