

# Enterprising Landscapes: Business Districts and the Urban Forest

*Kathleen L. Wolf*  
*Center for Urban Horticulture*  
*University of Washington*  
*Seattle, Washington*

**Abstract:** Revitalizing business districts have many needs and few resources. Research reveals that businesses report a long list of tree-related costs and annoyances. Businesses also recognize the benefits of trees in creating consumer friendly environments. Effective partnerships enhance urban forestry programs in business environments, attracting shoppers and improving profitability.

How do trees contribute to the consumer environment? Can they benefit the business bottom line? Retail marketers have explored a myriad of factors to learn more about consumer behavior. Yet, one aspect is often underestimated - the retail environment. Many retail districts within America's urban centers are working hard to revitalize and regain their competitive capacity. The tangible, physical business setting creates first and lasting impressions for potential customers. Urban forestry can play an important role in business districts - improving both environmental quality and the consumer environment.

American cities are characterized by sprawl, more so than any other country in the world. People are drawn to new suburbs in the countryside, choosing to settle on "unimproved" land rather than revive aging neighborhoods. This land use dynamic contributes to the woes of the inner city. As residents, then businesses, withdraw from the urban centers economic disinvestment erodes the vitality of local business centers. The physical and institutional infrastructure needed to support human settlement is in place, becoming underutilized as urban neighborhoods become a pockmarked shadow of their former selves. Many local

commercial districts, despite a dire history of prosperity then abandonment, are working toward a revival.

Generally, research has revealed that urban forests provide many benefits for city residents, including improved environmental quality and more satisfying quality of life. Most research has focused on parks and residential settings, overlooking the importance of the urban forest to private enterprise. Little is known about the perceived benefits and values of the urban forest in retail and commercial settings.

A two-part research project seeks to fill the void. First, qualitative interviews were used to identify and interpret key issues. In phase two a questionnaire is being distributed to business owners and managers, as well as business district visitors. The interviews revealed strong attitudes about the values of trees and their suitability in the retail environment. Three different groups of people were interviewed in Washington state cities: 1) small business owners/managers, 2) business association staff, and 3) local government urban forestry professionals. These stakeholders shared some perceptions about trees, but differed widely on many issues. We share some of their responses

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here, hoping to contribute to expanded urban forestry programs in retail and commercial settings.

Most tree associated costs and annoyances are specific issues or problems that impact business profits. Small businesses with marginal profitability feel unable to extend their operating expenses to curbside. Even committed tree advocates felt compelled to describe annoyances associated with trees. Nonetheless, tree proponents offered working solutions though this information does not seem to be widely available within business communities.

The most frequent complaint about trees is reduced visibility, implying reduced consumer access. Trees are blamed for screening signs, awnings, storefronts, and window displays from both pedestrian and automobile traffic. "We like green things, but not necessarily trees," said an art gallery owner who had removed trees, then planted flowers to enhance business visibility. Some business owners recognized that visibility issues can be mitigated by improved sign and storefront design. Others stress severe pruning or tree removal. Opening or lifting a canopy through responsible pruning was rarely discussed, suggesting an important education need.

Engineering impacts are another category of costs. On-site exhibits of structural damage included buckled sidewalks, cracked curbs, heaved roads and even cracked building walls, as well as trees entangled in utility lines. Most problems are a consequence of "wrong tree, wrong place" choices of the past. Clearly, preventative planning and planting produce significant long-term savings.

Another annoyance was the loss of functional space. Trees are perceived to reduce usable outdoor space, particularly parking. Parking spaces are regarded as being directly

related to the number of customer visits and revenue. As one landscape architect observed, customers have " . . . a sense of what is due; parking [directly] in front of a business is a right!" While many communities have successfully planted trees with minimal loss of parking spaces, business operators remain skeptical. Other functional concerns include loss of outdoor seating space and market space.

A direct cost to businesses is removal of tree debris. Flowers, twigs, fruit and leaves are all materials perceived to dirty sidewalks, parked cars and even pedestrians. While certain plant species in certain seasons do produce prodigious amounts of organic matter, the complaints were also based on limited resources to deal with the problem. Some business respondents felt that the city had an obligation to remove these materials. Others simply felt overwhelmed. As a beauty supply business owner said, "the leaves are a nuisance. Where do we put them? In the gutter? They blow all around again. The rain makes them slippery. A small business owner just doesn't have the time to take care of these things."

Security was the final costs category. Respondents believe that trees can harbor criminals that damage person and property. The possibility of a perpetrator climbing up and breaking into the business from the roof was reported as a reason for removing large trees. In addition, potential threats to personal security of both business customers and staff is a common justification for removal of small trees and shrubs.

Some business owners seemed to project their business difficulties onto adjacent street trees, blaming declining revenues on forest problems. Street trees have become a scapegoat in these instances, a mask for larger, more complex issues such as competition from chain retailers, changing business composition in a

district, or perhaps even a business plan that needs review. Reports of tree "hate crimes" - radical, subversive removals of "problem" trees - indicate negative emotion and resentment that needs to be acknowledged in tree programs.

In contrast, reports of tree benefits address the economic realities of small business from a positive perspective. Rather than attending to tree by tree issues, as with costs, benefits reports focused on generalized psychological and perceptual dimensions. Charles Lewis (1996) wrote that "landscaping tells stories and defines settings." Dwyer et.al. (1994) report that extensive preference assessments for urban forest management have revealed the "deep emotional ties between people and trees," including sensory, symbolic and human community dimensions. These subtle and intangible benefits, deemed external effects by economists, are rarely calculated in the price of goods and services. Business association staff members, in particular, recognized that the powerful messages of trees can be harnessed to create more profitable retail environments.

The first of four benefits categories was Positive Mood. "Planting and landscape draw a lot of people . . . We wouldn't have what we have without plants," explained a property manager in a successful business district. Plants and trees, if properly selected and maintained, create a positive experiential and sensual space.

The second category, Visual Identity and Unity is about creating an imageable, distinctive place through the use of plants. These efforts are often combined with renewal and display of local cultural heritage, using murals and window displays. Careful plant choice and design can make an area memorable for a visitor, inviting return visits. A distinct plant palette can also define the boundaries of the district, encouraging visitors to shop within a specific area.

A Message of Care is the outdoor extension of a business' customer service commitment. The owner of a construction firm remarked, "You're always 'on' with the public. Everything you do shows the quality of your business." Nassauer (1995) reports that an image of care enhances visual preference for farm and residential landscapes. We found that this is also true of business districts, with direct economic consequences. A well designed and maintained street landscape suggests the level of attention that a consumer can expect from a business.

The last benefits category, Signal of Change, is about the visual transformations that occur in revitalizing retail centers. Trees can send upbeat messages to prospective customers and new businesses. "Making the town look better is the fastest, easiest and least expensive thing to do to improve our image. . . Trees improve our image in a quality way, in an easy way," observed a public works professional.

Urban forestry professionals promoted the environmental benefits of the urban forest such as improved air quality, energy savings or noise and wind blockage. Curiously, few business people mentioned biophysical benefits. Business owners and managers are attuned to the realities of everyday costs and how trees might boost revenue. Positive place mood, visual identity and unity, a message of care and signals of change - these benefits reports convey a psychological experience of place that can be developed to attract consumers.

The achievement of urban forest benefits is a process that requires many partners. First, businesses within a district must decide to work together. In many districts, streetscapes and trees have been treated like business supplies and inventory. Each autonomous business commits to tree planting or landscape to a different degree and expression. In some districts merchants have come together,

establishing a local business improvement association, focused on collective goals. They are able to prepare plans that communicate a green vision of competitive value. Advantages of coordinated (rather than fragmented) effort are economies of scale, visual consistency, fairness in sharing expenses, uniform standards and routine maintenance. Having a plan also creates "an environment of opportunity," remarked one Chamber of Commerce member. As financial and technical resources become available, the community is positioned to act.

Municipal urban forestry professionals are important partners, helping businesses to plan for urban forest benefits and mitigate costs. Nonetheless, some business people reported constraints that made collaboration difficult. For instance, the most frequently mentioned district-wide needs are parking, security, clean-up and marketing. Urban foresters must recognize these issues and demonstrate that streetscape improvements are more than simple beautification, that they indirectly address these high priority needs by changing the social dynamics of a district.

Small business owners report that time constraints diminish their ability to be a part of urban forestry planning. Being sole proprietors, many are unable to leave their businesses unattended for planning or informational meetings. Alternative informational opportunities are suggested. In addition, several reported that requests for help from municipal agencies are met with a protracted process of follow-up calls and interoffice referrals. Different departments (e.g. public works versus parks) may have varying protocols for handling requests, providing sometimes inconsistent, even conflicting services. Abandoning the quest can become the most time-effective response.

New partnerships are essential. Recent studies have reported that many business

communities in American cities have not been active in urban forestry efforts. Acknowledging the needs and concerns of both individual business owners and business associations can improve that relationship. Urban forest professionals have a personal appreciation for trees. They may not be aware of the full array of costs and annoyances that businesses perceive. Or, they are aware of the annoyances and view them as inconsequential in the big picture of environmental benefits that trees offer. New messages are needed for new audiences. Benefits, success stories and "right-tree, right place" demonstrations can reveal urban forest benefits relevant to the business bottom line.

Urban forestry is an essential element of a district-wide, multi-focus economic revitalization plan. Street tree plantings and parks improvements can achieve high visual impact and significant symbolic effect with modest capital outlays. An active urban forestry program is a visible, tangible effort that signifies to the public and to participating business owners that a transformation is underway. Districts of decline can become districts of healthy enterprise as urban forestry partners work together.

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