



Growing with Green: Business Districts and the Urban Forest



How do you decide where to shop for everyday goods and services? Neighborhood business districts work hard to attract consumers to their retail centers. The appearance of a business setting can send many messages. For instance, look at the two pictures to the left. Where would you rather shop? And why?



Both benefits and costs are associated with trees in retail environments. A research project at the University of Washington helps us to better understand both consumer and business perceptions of trees. Here are results of an interview-based study of business owners and business association staff.

Build on the Benefits

Business owners and managers deal with the realities of tree costs. Nonetheless, appearances does make a difference. Customers will notice a healthy, vital urban forest. The messages of trees may help build profits!

POSITIVE MOOD – “Planting and landscape draw a lot of people... We wouldn’t have what we have without plants,” explained a property manager. Plants and trees, if properly selected and maintained, create a pleasant space. A realtor observed that, “The benefits are huge! [Trees] just give a whole different dimension to a street, particularly with seasonal changes.”

VISUAL IDENTITY AND UNITY – Plants are used to create a distinctive place. Landscape can be combined with 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



Keep things neat!
Good maintenance
gives customers cues
of quality and service.

boundaries of the district, encouraging visitors to shop within a specific area.

MESSAGE OF CARE – The urban forest is the outdoor extension of a business’ customer service commitment. A contractor remarked, “You’re always ‘on’ with the public. Everything you do shows the quality of your business.” Small businesses strive to provide quality products and service for customers. That effort should not end at the door. A well designed and maintained

street landscape suggests the level of attention that a consumer can expect from a business.

SIGNAL OF CHANGE – Trees can send upbeat visual 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. She added that, “If things look nice... it sends a message to new businesses; they see it as being proactive.”

Understand the Costs

A successful tree project in a business district must respond to concerns and interests of business owners. Many business owners are reluctant to have trees outside their businesses. Some consider trees a lower priority than parking, sanitation, security or marketing. Knowing the costs of streetscape can help businesses make “right tree, right place” decisions about planning and maintenance.

VISIBILITY – A 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. Positive responses to these concerns include careful selection and siting of street trees and signs, as well as careful, strategic pruning.

ENGINEERING IMPACTS – Tree-caused structural damage can include buckled sidewalks, cracked curbs, and trees entangled in utility lines. Most problems can be prevented by making careful choices of the “right tree for the right place.” Preventative planning and planting produce significant long-term savings.

LOSS OF FUNCTIONAL SPACE – Trees are perceived to reduce usable outdoor space, particularly parking. 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 sidewalk market space.

TREE DEBRIS – Flowers, twigs, fruit and leaves can dirty sidewalks, parked cars and even pedestrians. Some business owners feel overwhelmed by seasonal clean-up needs. Others team up with neighbors to pay for a routine maintenance contractor.

SECURITY ISSUES – Personal security of both business customers and staff is a common justification for removal of small trees and shrubs. Careful selection, placement and maintenance of street vegetation can address these concerns.



Careful pruning can be used to lift a canopy, opening up views to shops and signs.



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