

# Town of Gray 2009-2010 Project Canopy Narrative

## Summary

The Town of Gray seeks to reestablish the importance of large shade trees to the physical and cultural welfare of its historic village. In order to do so, it proposes to accomplish five tasks within the scope of the Project Canopy Grant. One, it will establish a tree to five-member committee to guide planning and implementation of town policy on community forestry. Two, it will prepare an inventory of trees within and near the public right-of-way of streets within the village. Three, it will prepare a strategic plan based on this inventory and an assessment of town resources to carry out a community forest program. Four, it will propose to amend the Comprehensive Plan and Gray Village Master Plan to include community forestry as a goal for Village redevelopment. Fifth, draft ordinance amendments will be prepared to refine the standards of site plan review and design guidelines to more effectively respond to trees issues during project reviews.

## Historical Background

Like many northern New England communities, Gray reached its heyday of development in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The success of the community was expressed in the high cost, excellent styling, and sound construction of the many buildings built during this period. Some of these structures are now National Historic landmarks and are an important feature of Gray's downtown redevelopment program.

What is not so obvious, however, is how much the residents of Gray once valued large shade trees and other landscaped areas as part of the village environment.

Trees were used in sophisticated ways. They framed the views of important public buildings such as the Pennell Institute. They lined the streets to provide shade in summer and to separate private spaces, such as front yards from public spaces, such as roadways and sidewalks. Trees were used for cooling, dust control and for their beauty. Perhaps most of all, the large shade trees of the time represented the success that Gray residents felt they had achieved as a community.

The decline of rural northern New England that occurred in the middle and late 20<sup>th</sup> century is well documented. As people and capital moved to urban centers and to other regions of the country, Gray village also declined. Public buildings and homes were no longer well tended, landscaped areas were neglected, and the stately shade trees of the past were not replaced when they fell victim to disease, storm damage, road salt, and other hazards. Indeed, for many decades now, the residents of Gray have placed far less value on their trees and know less about them than their ancestors did.

The Town of Gray now intends to reverse this decline and make the village forest once again an integral part of its economic and community development program.



Historic scale and style Village development incorporated street trees effectively.

### **The Community Forestry Committee**

Central to this effort is the goal of establishing a Community Forestry Committee. The project will seek to identify three to five committed citizens willing to accept responsibility for the community forest plan and its long-term implementation. We would like to recruit these people from the groups who have the most at stake in the success of the redevelopment of the village, but anyone in the community who has the welfare of the town at heart and who has some knowledge of trees is also a fine candidate. The main stakeholder groups include the home and business owners located in the village, the Community and Economic Development Committee, the Recreation/Conservation Committee, the Gray Historical Society, and the Gray Cemetery Committee. Although the initial charge of this committee with focus on street trees in the Village, its mission could be expanded in the future to address other public forestry issues.

An interim oversight committee will initiate the project consisting of Economic Development Director George Theborge, Community Development Administrator Doug Webster, and a member of the community with particular experience or interest in this initiative. This group will coordinate activities until a formal group can be identified and established with the approval of the Town Council.

Public information and participation on the project will begin with the search for the committee members and announcement of the grant award. The two local papers in the area will be contacted for news releases and the tree committee members themselves will submit opinion pieces in order to stimulate public awareness and interest in the project. The Town web site will also be used for announcements and local public cable will do spots on the project.

### **Street Tree Inventory**

The Town has contacted Whitney Tree Service for an estimate to conduct a street tree inventory that meets the requirements for Project Canopy grants. About 180-200 trees lie within or very near the right-of-way of streets within the Village. Each tree will be tagged with a number and the information gathered will consist of seven categories of data: number, species, size, site conditions, overhead utilities, condition assessment, and recommended management. The data will be recorded in the field on paper forms and entered into Microsoft Excel or an equivalent program.

Prior to the inventory, Town staff will mail postcards to the residents and business owners of the village that the inventory is being planned and encouraging them to support the effort.



A street tree inventory will document existing trees.

### **Strategic Plan**

The next step will be to develop a Strategic Plan based on three types of data. One is the street tree inventory. The second will be an evaluation of the areas within the Village where street trees are conspicuously absent as a result of poorly designed parking lots, driveway entrances, and lack of separation between roadways and private property. The third will be an evaluation of the Town's financial and human resources necessary to carry out a community forestry program over the long run. The Strategic Plan is intended to be technically sound, but concise. Its goal is to set up a program whereby Gray can reestablish street trees as a major feature of downtown redevelopment and the quality of place in Gray village. As this is the first attempt to establish a community forestry program, the Strategic Plan will focus on developing a continuing process for tree planning as opposed to tree planting and maintenance. If successful, this initial effort will lead to growth of the program over time.

Gary Fogg, a natural resource planner for Land and People, LLC, will lead the drafting of the plan in consultation with Whitney Tree Service, town officials, and the Community Forestry Committee. The Committee will invite residents throughout Gray to attend meetings to discuss the plan and its recommendations. They will do this through opinion pieces in the two local papers, notification on the Town website, and publication of the meeting times in the local papers. In addition, Town staff will mail a second round of postcards to village property owners and residents in order to encourage them to come to the meeting also.

### **Amendment to the Comprehensive Plan and Village Master Plan and Ordinances**

The Comprehensive Plan should recognize the importance of street trees to the vitality of Gray Village. Unfortunately, the plan does not mention them but talks solely about traditional forest industries in rural parts of town. Proposing to add such language can correct this deficiency, but, just as importantly, it can be a way to stimulate public interest and discussion concerning the role of shade trees in downtown redevelopment. The Village Master Plan calls for landscaping of properties when they are redeveloped, but it fails to identify existing street trees as needing protection and the importance of integrating existing landscaping with new landscaping added as sites redevelop. Similarly, the emphasis of ordinance provisions is limited to the installation of new landscaping.



Modern Village development viewed trees as obstacles to vehicular circulation and sign views.

The Community Forestry Committee will lead this effort with the assistance of George Theborge, the Economic Development Director. George has rewritten the Town's zoning and subdivision ordinances recently and is closely connected with the redevelopment of the Village. He is the primary person in the Town government structure that oversees implementation of the Comprehensive Plan and Village Master Plan. George will avail himself of technical advice regarding trees and their management as needed from Gary Fogg, Steve LaVallee, and Whitney Tree Service.

As part of this process, Mr. Theborge will prepare a slide show with assistance from the Gray Historical Society documenting the role of shade trees in the town's past. He will also identify the importance of trees to development of successful business

sites and for downtown revitalization. This show will be used as a stand-alone presentation at public meetings and as a technical aid for the Community Forestry Committee in discussing why amending the Comprehensive Plan and Village Master Plan to include street trees is based on good precedent. He will draft proposed amendments to those documents as well as possible land use ordinance amendments to address performance standards for tree protection and integration of existing and new landscaping in site redevelopment.

Amending the Town's long range plans and ordinances, even for a project as relatively straightforward as this one, will probably take longer than the time period allotted for completion of the grant. Consequently, the Town will prepare the plans and draft amendments as part of this project but cannot promise to accomplish implementation of policy changes prior to submitting its request for reimbursement under the grant.