

# Tree Programs in Unincorporated Chatham County

*an Educational Paper by the Savannah Tree Foundation*

The canopy tree removal on Wilmington Island Road in the spring of 2008 caused concern, anger and unfavorable publicity for Chatham County government. The Savannah Tree Foundation received many inquiries from agitated citizens.

**Although the Savannah Tree Foundation has no authority over the decision of Chatham County government departments, we respectfully suggest that our government create and fund a comprehensive plan for urban forestry management.**

We address these suggestions to the Chatham County Commissioners, as well as the four different departments that are currently involved in urban forestry issues in unincorporated Chatham County. These departments include the county manager's office, the county engineering office, the county inspections office, and the public works department.

**This management plan should include the following elements:**

1. The **Chatham County Tree Ordinance** needs to be reviewed and updated. This task is underway in the County Engineer's office. STF suggests the tree ordinance:
  - needs to be aligned with the City of Savannah Tree Ordinance
  - be clearly identified as a Tree Ordinance
  - be enforced by personnel who have been certified by the International Society of Arboriculture
  - promote the designation of Exceptional trees
  - be monitored by the Chatham County Tree Commission, an oversight committee which should be regenerated and should hold quarterly meetings to promote urban forestry education, tree preservation, and review variance requests
  - contain a provision that all landscape and tree planting plans for sites over one acre should be prepared by a registered landscape architect. Plans for sites of less than one acre may be prepared by other registered professionals with competency in landscape design.

2. A **Tree Maintenance Program** should be established by the Chatham County Commission and placed under the supervision of an arborist who is certified by the International Society of Arboriculture. The tree maintenance program should:
  - address pruning for roadway clearance requirements
  - identify and remove hazard trees
  - prune and mulch trees in public spaces
  - conduct and maintain a current tree inventory
  
3. **Tree Planting** activities should be coordinated under the supervision of an International Society of Arboriculture certified arborist.

## **REZONING AND BUFFERS**

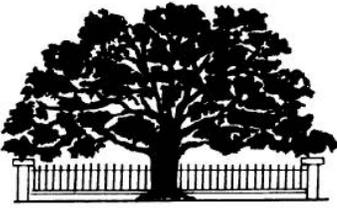
Currently, Chatham County rezoning and buffer issues are handled by the Metropolitan Planning Commission, which is responsible for administering development, including zoning and buffer variance requests. The rezoning requirements establish buffer specifications. These specifications are the result of guidelines established by planning professionals and are reviewed and authorized by appropriate boards.

**In conjunction with the development of a comprehensive plan for urban forestry management, it is also necessary for the Metropolitan Planning Commission to do a better job of interpreting and enforcing existing buffer and zoning regulations as they apply to canopy trees.**

- The Savannah Tree Foundation urges the Metropolitan Planning Commission to continue to adhere to established guidelines mandated by the zoning regulations where buffers are concerned, as this will allow sufficient space for preserving existing trees or planting new canopy trees.
  
- In cases where failure to grant a variance would be a hardship on the owner, we suggest that a minimum buffer of 25-30 feet is necessary to establish or maintain large trees.

**For more information please contact:**

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# Reference Info on Chatham County Tree Policies

The Savannah Tree Foundation has recently reviewed the policies that govern the urban forest in Chatham County's unincorporated area. This is a brief summary of the results of our research.

## **Tree Ordinance:**

The Chatham County tree ordinance is called Land Disturbing Activities Ordinance (LDAO). It was adopted in 1995, amended in 1997 and is currently being updated by the Chatham County Engineering Department, which serves as the administrator of the ordinance. The County Arborist and the Arborist in the Inspections Department are the personnel who handle the administration of the LDAO. The LDAO applies to all land in unincorporated Chatham County with the following exemptions: utility easements, portions of airports and heliports, agricultural lands, minor residential developments, single family lots, and small commercial developments (less than 2500 sq feet).

The purpose of the LDAO is to: Reduce air pollution, prevent soil erosion, minimize increase in temperature, maintain moisture levels in air and land, reduce noise, protect and enhance the aesthetic qualities of the community, reduce and filter stormwater runoff, and to maintain whenever possible a 50% canopy cover across unincorporated Chatham County.

The ordinance dictates the preservation, removal and replanting of trees on commercial, multi-family and single family residential developments.

The LDAO has provisions for:

- Tree protection barriers for critical root zone of preserved trees during construction (1 foot per 1 inch diameter of the tree)
- Watering or irrigation (except for single family development)
- Size of planting sites in relation to size of the tree at maturity
- Placement of trees in relation to buildings
- Size requirements for preserved trees as well as newly planted trees
- Standards for preserved stands of trees (requirements for inspection by County Arborist)
- Designation of Exceptional trees
- Protection of the critical root zone of trees on county property
- Timber Harvesting Standards and Reforestation Plans
- Principles for dedication of green space in commercial, industrial and multi-family developments
- Pre-construction meetings of owner, agent, and contractors with county arborist

## **Chatham County Tree Commission:**

The Chatham County Land Disturbing Activities Ordinance provides for the establishment of a Chatham County Tree Commission, which is administered by the County Engineering Department. The Commission was active for several years under the guidance of Mrs. Page Hungerpiller. The Commission is fully populated but has held only two meetings in the last five

years, and those were called recently to discuss a variance. The Savannah Tree Foundation has discussed this issue with the County Engineer and has made suggestions regarding the Commission in our comments on the updating of the Chatham County Tree Ordinance.

### **Pruning:**

Maintenance limb pruning is handled by the Public Works and Parks Services Department on a response basis. Small tree pruning is done by in house staff members who periodically receive training at STF's pruning & mulching workshops. Large tree pruning is done on a contract basis by tree care vendors. The county's pruning initiatives are to maintain the prescribed clearance of 13.6' on county roadways. The recent road clearance pruning on Wilmington Island Road could be used as a textbook example of how not to prune, and the resulting massacre will probably hasten the demise of these canopy trees.

Utility line clearing is handled on a contract basis by Georgia Power. There are standards for utility line maintenance. The contracts are overseen by a certified arborist from Georgia Power.

For the past three years the Public Works Department has requested funding for equipment and a work crew of one certified arborist and two crew men to undertake maintenance of the public trees in unincorporated Chatham County. The Savannah Tree Foundation has appeared before the County Commission in support of this budget request. The budget request has been denied each year. The 2008-2009 budget does have a \$24,000 allocation for tree replacement.

### **Tree Planting:**

Chatham County does not have a reforestation program. Irregular special projects such as the parking lot at Skidaway Narrows boat ramp, Tom Triplett Park, Mother Matilda Beasley Park, wetland mitigation projects, and partnerships with the Savannah Tree Foundation's Community Volunteer Tree Planting Program have added trees to the county's canopy. Until 2008, there was no line item in the budget that referred to tree planting projects. In 2008, \$24,000 was allocated for replacement trees.

### **Hazard Trees:**

At this time, there is no clearly defined program for identifying and responding to hazard trees.

### **Tree Inventory:**

Chatham County does not have an inventory of trees on public land in unincorporated Chatham County. A tree inventory identifies the number, location and species of trees on public property, as well as the health and condition of those trees. A tree inventory was completed in the late 80s on a contract basis by Davy tree services, but a tree inventory that is not updated is useless. Current tree inventories are important in monitoring trees that may become hazardous and in quantifying tree loss following natural disasters.

### **This reference information was researched and provided by:**

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