

Elgin branching out with sustainability program

City wants to manage its estimated 80,000 trees

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ELGIN — Elgin will be spending a lot of green to get an accurate count of trees growing on public property, but will be getting a significant return on that investment.

The city council Wednesday night approved paying Davey Resource Group more than \$300,000 from its casino tax money to complete an inventory and forestry management plan for city-owned trees.

But before residents turn red about that amount, they might first consider that according to Parks Superintendent Jim Bell, the city has qualified for a grant of close to \$1.8 million in stimulus package money from the U.S. Forest Service to expand and improve its forestry efforts.

That Elgin already was con-

sidering a tree count made it easier for the city to obtain the funding, Davey district manager Brian Borkowicz said.

Elgin has an estimated 80,000 or so trees in its parks, easements and streetscapes. And those trees can be seen as assets that provide a return on any investment in them, arborists and city officials claim.

For example, the U.S. Forest Service says 100 mature trees siphon about 100,000 gallons of rainfall a year, thereby reducing stormwater runoff. That's almost twice as much water as is held in the pool at The Centre in downtown Elgin.

Trees also absorb carbon dioxide, thus helping curtail air pollution. And the U.S. Department of Energy says that three shade trees can save a homeowner \$100 to \$250 a year in cooling costs.

Going 'green'

The count is part of the city's "green" goals. Councilman Dave Kaptain helps oversee the nine committees that meet once a month to help put together the city's first sustainability master plan. The idea for a tree count is tied to the Sustainability Community Advisory Team, one of the committees.

Team members believe that a count will help show the condition of trees, identify trees that may be causing safety issues, suggest prime spots for planting new trees and allow better management of what to plant and where. It also may help firm up an ordinance regulating planting and removal on public land and setting stronger guidelines for trees in upcoming subdivisions.

While the city has a broader ordinance — which is required of any town named a Tree City USA — a distinction Elgin has held for 19 years — attempts at further defining the legislation failed in the past, "when people wanted to go into yards," Kaptain said.

Science students taught by Debbie Perryman at Elgin High School have played a role in looking at a refined tree ordinance, which could be shaped by the results of the citywide survey.

Perryman said the idea came from taking her freshman biology students out to a nature trail and outdoor classroom. "I explained that oak woodlands are more endangered than tropical rain forests worldwide," Perryman said. "This shocked the kids, and they began to question what could be done."

The class looked into a California law that protects oak woodlands and discussed proposing a federal, a state or a local law.

The class put together a PowerPoint presentation it gave to the city council earlier this year. Elgin High students were involved with the initial meetings of the Sustainable Community Team last school year and will be again next semester.



Urban forester Josh Behounek of the Davey Resource Group measures a Bradford pear tree on Route 25 in Elgin on Tuesday. The company will oversee the inspection and count of some 80,000 trees in Elgin.

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