

Tree Preservation Planning Committee Listening Session – Small Group Discussions

June 4, 2025

Prompt 1: What brought you here tonight? What are your hopes and fears about trees in Needham?

Prompt 2: What do you want the Committee to know or keep in mind as we begin our work?

Zoom Small Group Discussion Notes

- Curiosity of ways to address the loss of trees without creating other issues
- How it affects homeowners (newer/older)
- Planting is expensive → responsibility of homeowners to sustain
- Worry that it could backfire → people won't want responsibility
- Distinction between new developments and just taking down old trees/discussed trees
- Cutting down older trees → can't directly replace (takes time)
- Valuing the trees → insensitive homeowners
- Concern about lack of canopy and shade
- Developers not clear-cutting property
- A lot of curiosity about committee/what the plan is
- Concern for timeline/consistent approach to issue
- Transparency with Town's stance on trees needed
 - Explicative information → available access and direction
- Cables near trees can cause damage in storm events
- Preservation of older trees (not replaceable)
- Need to create rules around redevelopment
- New buyers are often unaware of trees before buying
- Rules targeting redevelopment
- Education on native trees/ecosystems → resources to help people for community benefit
- Invasive maples raised as an issue
- Town Hall and Town Common redevelopment lowered confidence in goal of preservation
- Want for refocus on valuing nature → mention of farmers' market
- New construction homes tend to be larger than previous
- Fear of more mature trees dying and falling
- A lot of disparity in which parts of town have canopy
- More aggressive tree replacement needed
- Common goal of more widespread canopy
- More varied
- Possibility of permit process considering takedown of trees
 - Targeted at property development

Small Group Discussion Notes Section 1

Prompt 1:

- 20+ resident, kids → outdoor activities
- Town affairs
- Less tree canopy
- More recognition where trees taken down on private property
- Homeowners
- Proactive approach
- Challenging policy issues
- Trees = asset
- Trees in the way of doing jobs
- Models to quantify tree value
- Storm run-off into basements after tree tear-down
 - Houses that never had flooding before
- Who makes these decisions
- Diseased trees?
- Transparency about trees
- Wants to see native trees that have evolved with town's ecosystem
- Hemlocks diseased, overgrown – don't want restrictions as private owner
- I know a tree that needs to come down, don't want Town to restrict this
- Wants common sense guidelines
- Pass on information to homeowners on trees/native trees
 - How to plant
 - Guidance on what to plant
- Bylaws are difficult to read
 - Would be as a builder, appreciated
- Committee summarize bylaws for residents
- No laws regarding private trees
 - Wants to see them
- Wellesley confusing bylaw
- Hire arborist, need to stick to their plan
 - However, significant cost to homeowner
 - Homeowner vs developer
 - Like wetlands – should be preserved, regulations valid
- Opportunity for homeowners to not have trees, so must compensate → pay into fund
- Communication, transparency, educate public
 - Put in news
 - Needham Observer, Local
- Maybe prompts in areas – like “attend tree meeting tonight”
 - Like at dump sign
 - Flyers at grocery stores, library
 - Another board?
- Need experienced pruners to cut trees → beautify towns

- Eversource
- Plant trees under power lines (smaller trees), be aware- however, less shade and tree canopy
- Town policy = only plant native trees
- Road with canopy 30 ft wide – enough, plant trees closer together
- No one wants to trade electricity for trees
- Houses are getting bigger and bigger
- Clean slate needed to do anything – is there a way to avoid this?
- Other town regulations?
 - State guide bylaws – but no regulation in Needham for private trees
- Right balance for Needham
- Issue across country
- Legacy trees- different rules, protected
- Concord's tree policy/model
- Towns on first revision of bylaws – Newton on trees
- Lexington guide for homeowners on trees – love to see for Needham to develop and this be given to every new homeowner
- More times you see something, the more you ignore it
- Sign up for town news notifications
 - Wants easier access to notification page
- Possible for standard handout for homeowners?
 - Used to have phonebook
- Memorial field sign
- Dynamic digital (electronic) billboard sign- plan not formulated yet
- Nice to have dashboard measuring on trees, accounting/recording
- Tree inventory on the way
- Difficult to get data – especially on private property
- At large house committee, tree discussion
- Gutters
- Cross-pollinate committees
- Find incentives to get builders/developers to work with Town

Small Group Discussion Notes Section 2

- Linden Street- people call asking to tear down tree and house
- Harris – medians full of trees

Concerns:

- Not planting enough trees to make up for the amount cut down
- Less shade trees ever since A/C
- People want more shade trees due to hotter planet
- Housing development → big trees cut down, decline of population
- What can people do to help? What can the Town do?

- Water trees during heat waves, take care of nearby trees, etc.
- EDUCATE. On how bad the problem is, causes and effects and telling people where and when and how to plant/help
- Droughts (ex: last fall) or too much precipitation at a time
- Clear cutting due to housing development

Small Group Discussion Notes Section 3

Prompt 1:

- Reasons for tree loss
 - People don't like dealing with leaves – the responsibility is too much
 - Builders remove all trees to make huge houses
- Trees seen the lungs of the neighborhoods
- Builders act because they want big trees
- Commercial properties have the same tree cutting issues!
- Trees being cut down in other properties affect our properties too
 1. Trees help shade - too hot to walk around during the day
 2. Replacing the trees with other types of trees can't work
 - a. Plus, single crop housing- builders using the same types of trees
 3. Don't have the budget to remove trees – punishing/betraying the wrong residents
 - a. If the tree cutting goes into taxes, it will punish the wrong people

Prompt 2:

1. Needham does a great job planting trees
 - a. The Town is receiving flak for damage on trees that are on private property
 - b. The Town truly does well planting new trees
2. Builders causing most of the damage
 - a. Should the size of houses be reduced in order to protect trees
3. Town may evaluate trees to keep them
4. Required shade tree on every new build
 - a. Offered free tree
5. Tax on tree removed can lead to more public tree planting
6. Signs to announce the work

Small Group Discussion Notes Section 4

- 40 Linden – old tree
 - People call asking to tear down tree & house
- Livingston Circle
 - Not many trees → plant through Town
- Harris Ave, lots of trees in medians
- Concerns:
 - Not planting enough trees to make up for the amount cut down
 - What is the future going to look like?
 - Miss big shade trees
 - People don't care as much about shade over since the invention of A/C

- Hotter planet, need more shade trees walking places
- Tree canopy is shrinking
- Housing development and big trees cut down due to age → decline of tree population
- What can people do to help? What can the town do?
 - Water trees during heat waves, take care of nearby trees, etc.
- How bad is the problem?
 - Educational component of what's going on
 - Housing development affecting existing tree decline already happening due to climate change
 - Entire lots being clear cut
 - Reduce sizes of homes → more trees
 - Droughts (ex: last fall) or too much precipitation at a time
- Bring people together with Town event/charity to raise money and awareness about trees → give people something worth donating for
- Have people donate for a tree and get a plaque in front of the tree reading "donated by..."
 - Let people pick what type of tree and where to give them a sense of ownership
- Town wouldn't take down beloved trees unless diseased (ex: maples on webster)
- Diseases coming from more things

Small Group Discussion Notes Section 5

Any thoughts: concerns

- Tree mom
 - Old tree on property
 - Wants to see it last for long time
 - Called and mailed to cut down tree, does not want to cut down tree
- Lots of tear downs, no street trees
- No room for many trees
- Not enough variation of trees/trees much smaller than Oak Hill in Newton
 - A lot of streets in Needham do not have shade trees
 - Very hot in summer with no trees
- Tree canopy seems to be shrinking
- More trees coming down than planted
- Some town trees make it, and some do not
 - What can people do to help town trees?
 - Adopt a tree
- What can the Town do to help the trees?
- What information can the Town give on trees?
 - What types of trees should be planted?
- Give information and education on trees
 - People will be encouraged to help/invest in trees
- Ideas to help:

- Person can donate money/adopt a tree
- Education: letting people know information on what tree to plant and where to plant it so it can last
- Form online to donate a tree of their choice
- Let people have more personal ownership over it
- Thoughts on: Town role in trees taken down on private property
 - Cannot clear cut the whole thing
 - Limit the clear cuts on trees
 - Some type of mitigation on trees
- Easier for developers to clear cut the trees
 - Rules that developers cannot clear cut
- Some trees are taken down because of safety measures and are diseased
- Limit of water
- Drought concerns: how will lack of water effect growth of trees
- Greater challenge of climate change
 - No water
 - Huge storms of rain – knocking trees down
 - Heat desert
 - Enough shade, surface type
 - Preserve tree canopies
- What will the town look like in the future?
- What side of history are we on?
- Costly to care for trees
 - Effect of climate change: lots of different tree species are becoming diseased
- High usage of A.C
 - Adds to climate change
- Goal: leaving more trees during a teardown
- Large trees can provide air conditioning
 - Hard for people to choose houses with trees

Summary Actions:

- Town inform and educate people on trees
 - Letting people know what tree to plant and where so it can last
- Encourage people to invest in planting and helping trees
 - If a person donates money/adopts a tree, they can get a plaque on it
 - Submit a form that person chooses the trees they want to adopt
 - Allows more personal ownership
- Limit and mitigate clear cutting lots
- Rules that developers cannot clear cut
 - Leave as many trees as possible in tear downs
- Understand usage of A.C and climate change
- Working on preserving tree canopies
- Ask questions that are concerning the future

- What will the town look like in 15-20 years?

Small Group Discussion Notes Section 6

- Concerned and curious about trees
- Tree situation, concerned what happens when trees are taken down
 - Often felt emotionally connected to trees
- Existing homes, wanting balance
 - Wanting reasons for taken down trees
- Concerned about larger and older trees taken down for construction
- Old trees replaced with small shrubs rather than real trees
- Riverside Street, one says somebody wants to take down the woods to build townhouses
 - Several hearings because multiple people spoke up about this
- Fear that the unfair/unstructured tear downs of trees is harmful
- Trees are important for the environment, such as providing shade and oxygen, mitigates flooding. Changes the character of the town, seeming as if the town no longer has personality
- Values history and size of old trees rather than younger ones
- If a tree is removed, should be an obligation to replace the trees
- ½ acre lot and house town down and took down the beautiful trees
 - Motivator to come to meeting
 - Trees in perfect condition
- Wants controls/requirements about taking down trees. If it is a big tree, those should replant or give back more than they took
- Big trees aren't the same as little ones, they don't provide the same qualities such as charm, shade, mitigation, and more
- Many think it's important to talk to neighboring towns
- Creating bylaws for taking down trees
- Do everything we can to conserve trees
- Prevent climate change
- Multiple felt connected to trees, feeling saddened once taken down
- One has a black oak in her front yard, large and beautiful, but worries that it will be ripped down later
- Trees getting cut in town square and High School
 - Felt it made the town look bad and it was horrible
- Want to be educated on why trees are cut (why they are cut if things like sick or invasive, they want to be informed)
- Needs to be brochures or information in the place where they get the trees help to inform about the tree and its qualities (native or not, safety)
- The Town to have information online about trees for homeowners, make it more detailed; where to plant, how deep the hole, how far from the street
- Private organizations to aid people
- "Green Needham" a club organization one of the attendees is a part of
- The citizens of Needham to plant trees themselves

- Importance of climate change; CO2, shade, mitigation
- Comment highlights:
 - “I love the old oak tree in my yard. Will it survive when I no longer live here?”
 - “We should find a way to save the healthy and mature trees.”
- Specific cases cited:
 1. A old colonial on 1/2 acre lot was razed, the lot divided in half, and 2 houses built selling for 3 and 4 million. No trees survived.
 2. Riverside Street has seen 5 teardowns since 2003, and the removal of 26 trees. And construction resulted in damage to (and removal of) additional trees growing in an adjacent park.

Small Group Discussion Notes Section 7

Prompt 1:

- Housing and trees go hand in hand (under two different boards)
- Climate change (tree canopy) providing shade
- Takes time to grow a large tree (can't easily be replaced)
- Trees retain water, it's healthy to be surrounded by greenery and shade
- Not removing them completely (cutting branches)
- It's expensive to remove a tree
- Licenses to cut down a tree
- Wellesley's laws regarding tree cutting (and other towns)

Prompt 2:

- Causing issues to the sidewalks, hazards, diseases
- How would trees service construction/branch cuttings?
- “Tree city”
- Trees impact housing construction (housing additions typically override trees)
- 6" diameter tree removals
- Colors/richness of trees affected
- We like the replacing tree law
- We need consequences for cutting down trees
- People don't spend time in their yards because there's no shade
- We're behind other towns
- Stepping stones towards change (not a dramatic cut off)