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Alamosa Trees: Tree Inventory & Orientation
by Marilyn Loser

Dean Swift, Tree Board member, helped participants identify tree species during the recent “Tree Identification Walking Tour” in downtown Alamosa. The Alamosa Tree Board organized the walk as a public service and a preliminary activity for the upcoming Alamosa Street and Park Tree Inventory.

Some of the more unusual tree species sighted were New Mexico locust flaunting deep pink blossoms (NW corner of 4th and Ross in parking lot), Tatarian maple (719 Main), Little Leaf linden (915 4th), and birch (720 Main). More predominant downtown species are ash, honey locust, cottonwood, box elder, willow, crabapple and elm.

Most of us can identify broad leaf cottonwoods with their wide, triangular leaves. It is more difficult to distinguish between narrow leaf cottonwoods and willows since the leaves seem so similar. The trained observer steps back and looks at the trunk and branches. Cottonwood trunks and smaller branches are more whitish while willows have a yellow cast. Now, even I can tell the difference. I’ve found more cottonwoods than willows downtown.

Just for practice, take a look at the large willow on the north side of SLV Federal on the north side of the 4th street parking lot and notice that the smaller branches are a bit yellow. Compare this to the whiter, smaller branches of the cottonwood at 72 Cascade.

The next step towards conducting the Tree Inventory will be a Tree Inventory Orientation on Tuesday, July 7, 6 p.m., at the Green Spot, 711 State. As it is the dinner hour there will be treats. Volunteers are needed for the inventory. The orientation workshop will show volunteers how to assess and record tree conditions. All materials will be provided. During the summer, teams of two will fan out across town to record conditions for the approximately 900 public trees that have been logged using global positioning hardware and software. For more information please email marilyn@alamosatrees.net or phone 719.589.3295.

Tree Inventories are costly. So why bother? Many in Alamosa are concerned about our community forest. We can’t help but note that numerous park trees (especially in Cole Parks and Boyd Parks) and street trees (those between the sidewalks and streets) are old and many not in the best of health. Alamosa doesn’t have a forestry department with a certified forester; park trees are the responsibility of the Department of Parks and Recreation. Volunteers will do the initial assessment; hence, the cost is in volunteer time, not city revenues.

The tree inventory will provide basic information in order to make informed management decisions, as strongly suggested by Tree City U.S.A. The inventory will supply

information on the number of trees, location, species, condition, size, and maintenance requirements.

More than 900 trees are in the database developed by the Alamosa Tree Board. Each tree has a unique identification, including latitude and longitude recorded using a global positioning (GPS) device. Volunteer teams, armed with satellite maps showing tree locations, will record tree species, diameter, and overall conditions including leaf and branch health, wire and sidewalk conflicts, and possible hazards.

A paper-based inventory, conducted in 1995, included park trees, street trees and cemetery trees. Unfortunately, we couldn't find any documentation aligning park trees' IDs with locations. A number of tree species were misidentified; many of the Main Street ashes were listed as lindens. Further, no one I talked with could recall how it was ever used.

Fourteen years later we don't want the new inventory merely tossed on the shelf to gather dust or Siberian elm seeds. With the aid of a database and GPS, this inventory will be a useful, living document more easily accessed and updated. Once data are gathered, tree inventory software will generate reports on species diversity, age distribution, canopy coverage, maintenance needs, and monetary value. The Tree Board will coordinate with the Engineering section of the Alamosa Department of Public Works to include the data in the city's global information system (GIS). The GIS maps data such as water and electrical lines, fire hydrants, sidewalks, and soon, street and park trees.

A good example of how a GIS system can use data to benefit citizens is happening right now in Alamosa. Valley-Wide Health Systems and LiveWell Alamosa completed a walkability audit of Alamosa with plans to improve community walking infrastructure. The data were submitted to Engineering. Technician Jeanette Luttrell incorporated the data into the city GIS. "We're using the data to prioritize creating ADA ramp corners to provide continuous sidewalks between walking destinations," said Luttrell. "The data are helping us with planning. We'll continually update the GIS as we make improvements." Updated information will be given back to the provider. Luttrell stressed the importance of working together.

"Of all the wonders of nature, a tree in summer is perhaps the most remarkable; with the possible exception of a moose singing 'Embraceable You' in spats." Woody Allen