



Trees, People, & Towns

by Marilyn Loser

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Soon I'll be in the first American Arbor Day City, Nebraska City, Nebraska. It may be a bit crazy to drive to eastern Nebraska in July, but I was invited to give a short presentation at the upcoming "Trees, People, and Towns National Conference – Resilient and Ready Community Forests". The goal of the conference is to provide information to small communities to assist them in taking a proactive approach to community forestry. The focus is on the issues that challenge small communities in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains.

I look forward to learning what other communities are doing. In creating my presentation, I reflected on my past seven years on the Alamosa Tree Board. I'll describe our environment, what I learned after becoming involved with the Alamosa Tree Board and Alamosa's community forest, what action we've taken, outcomes, and finally, challenges and next steps.

As those of us who've lived here awhile, our City with an estimated 9,800 population (US Census estimation), has a challenging growing climate. Mostly we're USDA zone 3. Extreme winter lows may typically range between -30 and -40 (all temps are in degrees F). The record low was -50 during January 1948 according to the Wunderground website. As I recall, there was a low of -50 in Hooper when I lived there in 1982. Jeans froze before you got them to the clothes line! This year we had a mild low of -23.

Besides the winter cold, we have a high elevation of 7543 feet, an average precipitation of only 7.3 inches, we're windy, and we can experience extreme, rapid temperature changes. For example, in February of this year we had a high of 60 degrees and low of 14. When this decrease happens rapidly, liquid in tree cells can't exit and the cells freeze and burst. This can damage and/or kill a tree.

After joining the Tree Board I spent time learning what was involved. Key points to me were that education/outreach is important, a tree inventory is starting point, and a management plan is necessary.

In April 2009 I started writing columns for the Valley Courier, created the website AlamosaTrees.net, discovered Colorado Tree Coalition grants, worked with the Dept. of Parks & Recreation, and conducted a preliminary Street & Park Tree Inventory based on a 1995 inventory.

Outcomes include receiving yearly grants from the Colorado Tree Coalition (with the invaluable lead of Heinz Bergann, Director of Alamosa Dept. of Parks and Recreation), an expanded tree palette, increased tree donations, pruning workshops (featuring Colorado Community Forester Vince Urbina), and a street and park tree inventory (including an online version at AlamosaTrees.net).

A reality check includes our harsh growing environment away from the Rio Grande. Just a block west of my home in town, there are only scrub shrubs, grasses, and weeds in the sandy terrain. In town, there

seem to be an increasing number of rental properties that are sporting zeroscaping (meaning NO vegetation as opposed xeriscaping that encourages low water usage). The zeroscaping properties are ugly and hot in summer. However, with increasing water rates, a solution to a healthy community forest is a challenge.

Challenges and next steps include to: focus on maintaining trees, promote benefits of healthy trees to home owners in a time of rising water prices, work on getting businesses involved, and encourage tree donations. Oh, and we need a management plan.

My main 'take aways' include: 1) plant an appropriate tree (for example, we planted several trees near the playground in Diamond Park over the years and they all died until we planted willow trees that can handle the water that drains off of the small adjacent hill), 2) dig a hole at least 2-3 times the diameter of the root ball and a touch above ground level (I've seen so many trees planted in narrow holes that died since the roots couldn't easily extend to the surrounding soil in the top 16 inches), 3) provide protection (fences around trees that don't allow deer or people to compromise trees until trunks are at least four inches in diameter), and 4) appropriate water (usually in Alamosa, trees don't get enough water).

In this time of climate change and increasing water rates, it is increasingly important to consider the health of our community forest. I'll let you know what I learn at the conference!

"They took all the trees and put them in a tree museum; and they charged all the people a dollar and a half just to see'em. Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you've got till it's gone. They paved paradise and put up a parking lot." Joni Mitchell, Big Yellow Taxi