The Vermont Urban & Community Forestry Program is happy to collaborate with the Vermont League of Cities and Towns to assist municipalities creating their own shade tree preservation plan. While the laws surrounding the role of tree wardens and the protection afforded to certain municipally-managed trees (i.e. shade trees) is now updated and clear, municipal officials and volunteers are also grappling with other issues surrounding non-shade tree and vegetation management often addressed in broader municipal tree policy. Our team of five people at the Vermont Urban & Community Forestry Program are all available to answer questions, provide educational and technical resources, and in some cases, award financial grants to support community tree care. As the technical assistance coordinator for the program, I often work with towns on the ground to gather information, share resources, and meet with tree wardens and members of selectboards, conservation committees, and tree committees who are interested in furthering urban tree and community forest stewardship in their communities.
When the tree warden statute amendments were passed in October of 2020, many people asked our program staff for examples of existing shade tree preservation plans. This was brand new legislation, so although many municipalities have formalized tree policies, no municipality had created a shade tree preservation plan with the five elements required by statute. During the winter of 2020-2021, the Vermont Urban & Community Forestry Program solicited municipalities to partner with the program as pilot towns writing shade tree preservation plans. Ten towns are formally recognized as pilot towns and are meeting to draft shade tree preservation plans with the intent to have them reviewed by the public and ultimately accepted in some form by both the tree warden and selectboard in early 2022. Six other municipalities have also contacted the program with questions, ideas, and draft language for their shade tree preservation plans, sometimes in concert with updated municipal tree policy that addresses tree management throughout the town.
Approach to shade tree designation

Some municipalities, such as Charlotte and Middlebury, are “all in” and will propose that all trees within the municipal right-of-way and on municipal property be designated as shade trees. Trees in urban centers may all be shade trees because they were planted by the municipality; the shade tree preservation plan in such instances clarifies this designation and include trees for which the municipality may have no proof of planting. Other municipalities that have had a long-standing and active tree warden and tree committee may find that designating all trees in public ways and places assigns continued support and protection towards public trees in a manner consistent with historic practices and community expectations.

Other municipalities are looking for certain roads or zones that may have public support for shade tree designation in the right-of-way or on municipal land. East Montpelier hopes to assign shade tree designation to five ash trees in the public right-of-way that have been treated with insecticide to protect them from emerald ash borer, preserving the town’s financial investment in these culturally important trees.

Many other municipalities are still collecting data about the trees in public ways and places. Shrewsbury and Mount Holly have begun public tree inventories that identify potential shade trees along their mostly rural municipal roads. West Windsor has requested public input to identify culturally and aesthetically important trees in town. Calais and East Montpelier are finding ways to ensure that certain small trees in the right-of-way are preserved to grow into future roadside canopy. Raising awareness about shade tree law and the role of the tree warden is part of this process.
For more information about the updated tree warden statutes, the role and history of tree wardens in Vermont, the importance of trees in public ways and places, and updates on shade tree preservation plans in the state, visit our website at vtcommunityforestry.org/treewardens. Some municipal officials and volunteers in the ten pilot towns are part of a google group, shadetreesvt@googlegroups.com, which others are welcome to join to share ideas and questions regarding shade tree designation and municipal tree policy. For any other assistance with tree inventories, the drafting of shade tree preservation plans, and outreach material for and about tree wardens, please contact Joanne Garton at joanne.garton@vermont.gov or (802) 249-4217, or visit vtcommunityforestry.org.