

 ORGANIZATIONAL POLICY	GENERAL ENGINEERING & OPERATIONS APPLICATION: All County Roads				
TITLE: Tree Policy	RESOLUTION NUMBER RC21-145	SUPERCEDE N/A	EFFECTIVE DATE 2/16/2021	SUPERCEDE N/A	POLICY NUMBER ADMN-10

INTENT

The Washtenaw County Road Commission (WCRC) has a statutory duty to maintain roads under its jurisdiction in reasonable repair so as to be reasonably safe and convenient for public travel. While carrying out this duty, either through the course of maintenance activities, improving roadside safety or constructing road improvements, sometimes trees must be trimmed or removed by WCRC staff, its contractors, or third parties under permit.

The intent of this policy is to provide guidance to staff making decisions regarding necessary tree removals and trimming while acknowledging the importance of trees to the Washtenaw County community.

BACKGROUND

The road right-of-way serves many purposes for road users. The roadside provides space to safely escape potential crashes or collisions, improves sight distances, offers space for maintenance activities such as snow removal and snow storage, provides an area that allows for proper road drainage and creates a sense of openness that contributes to driving ease and freedom from strain.

The roadside is also a common location for trees. Many of Washtenaw County's roads are valued for their tree-lined beauty and environmental features which create a sense of place. Trees play an important role in the community by improving water and air quality, reducing dust and traffic noise for adjacent property owners, stabilizing soil and slowing erosion as well as moderating stormwater runoff. Trees can also sequester carbon which may help reduce global climate change.

While trees are community assets for these reasons, they are also the single most often-struck fixed objects along the roadside. Crashes involving fixed objects often result in serious injuries or fatalities.

Roadside trees frequently have branches that grow over the roadway and may interfere with or cause damage to large vehicles such as school buses, fire trucks and ambulances, garbage and delivery trucks, farm equipment and snowplows. These trees also may shade the road surface which can create areas for moisture to collect on the roadway leading to potentially icy road conditions and potholes. Tree trimming allows for air circulation and sunshine to access the roadway, leading to safer conditions and a longer lasting road surface.

The sometimes-competing interests of roadside safety and tree preservation must be taken into consideration and balanced as WCRC fulfills its statutory obligations and serves the traveling public in Washtenaw County.

PLANNING AND DESIGN

In all planning, design and maintenance activities staff will attempt to minimize impact to trees whenever possible, but there will be times when trees along public roads need to be trimmed or removed.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

Staff will develop and follow procedures that reflect best environmental practices for tree trimming and/or removal. Examples include tree trimming practices that reduce susceptibility to oak wilt and following state/federal tree removal seasonal restrictions due to Indiana and Northern Long-Eared Bat roosting.

Staff involved with tree trimming and/or tree removal activities will participate in regular training related to tree trimming and/or removal. This training will cover a variety of topics including worker safety, techniques and environmental precautions.

TREE REMOVAL CRITERIA

This policy shall apply to trees measuring six (6) inches or greater in diameter at a point four and one-half (4 ½) feet above the ground. Trees less than six (6) inches in diameter and greater than two (2) inches in diameter may be removed in the sound discretion of staff. Trees less than two (2) inches in diameter are considered to be brush and may be removed under the Roadside Vegetation Control Program.

The following additional criteria will be considered by staff to determine if tree trimming or tree removal is necessary:

1. **Drainage and Road Improvements** – Whether the tree(s) are in conflict with the construction or maintenance of necessary drainage and/or road improvements.
2. **Crash Frequency** – Whether there are specific locations or road segments with evidence of vehicle-tree crashes either from actual crash reports or scarring of the trees.
3. **Intersections and Railroads** – Whether the tree(s) are obstructing adequate sight distance at intersections of public roads or railroad crossings.
4. **Horizontal and Vertical Curves** – Whether the tree(s) are located in a target position on the outside of curves, obstructing sight distance on the inside of curves or overhanging the road and obstructing sight distance on hillcrests and sags.
5. **Shading** – Whether shading from the tree(s) is causing structural deterioration and/or intermittent ice or snow accumulation on the traveled portion of the road.

6. **Fallen Trees** – Whether the tree(s) have fallen within the traveled portion of the roadway. WCRC will prioritize removing trees, limbs or branches that have fallen across the traveled portion of the roadway.
7. **Dead Trees** – If the tree(s) are dead and within the public road right-of-way, a property owner may contact WCRC to have the tree(s) removed. Tree removal will be scheduled by the district foreman as time and resources allow.
8. **Potentially Hazardous Trees** – The Washtenaw County Highway Engineer retains the right to remove any tree(s) within the public road right-of-way which may pose a safety hazard to the public.

NOTIFICATION

Staff will follow the Community Engagement Policy and Procedure when significant tree trimming or tree removal is required in a specific area to ensure that appropriate community engagement occurs in a timely and professional manner. Community engagement activities will include notifying township officials of projects, mailing letters to residents within project limits, holding public information meetings and sharing information on the WCRC website and/or Weekly Road Work Updates emails.

WCRC will also make a reasonable effort to provide notification to a property owner when tree(s) will be removed from the right-of-way adjacent to his or her property. Included with the notification will be a wood disposal form that the property owner may return to WCRC stating whether the property owner would like to keep the wood from the felled tree or have WCRC remove it from the premises and dispose of it.

If a property owner wants to have a tree located in the public road right-of-way removed, trimmed or pruned, the property owner may contact WCRC to request that trees be trimmed or dead trees removed. WCRC will evaluate each request and only remove/trim trees determined to be dead/dying or a safety hazard. Due to demand, this process may take a long time. A property owner may also trim or remove their own tree but shall seek WCRC permission through the permit application process before the owner engages in any such work. The permit application fee may be waived at WCRC's discretion.

TREE REPLACEMENT

When extensive tree removal is required on a specific road improvement project, WCRC staff may explore opportunities for tree replacement consistent with project design standards, statutory requirements, funding restrictions and public safety.

When allowed by funding sources, WCRC staff may seek grant opportunities for tree planting and replacement. WCRC staff will also support grant opportunities as requested by other organizations and consistent with the foregoing criteria.

Note: Revenue from the Michigan Transportation Fund (MTF), WCRC's primary source of road funding, is restricted and may only be used for transportation purposes, which does not include replacing trees removed by the road commission

A property owner may plant trees or install other landscaping within the public road right-of-way only under WCRC permit and subject to current WCRC Procedures and Regulations for Permit Activities.

THIRD-PARTY TREE WORK

WCRC will make permit holders aware of this policy and request compliance regarding any third-party tree trimming and tree removal work, where practicable.