

## Town survey tallies health of urban forest

By Andrew Oxford

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For a few days this summer, three crews of four fanned out across the Taos Historic District. Some toted clipboards, others were armed with iPads. But all were focused on the leaves and branches above their heads as they walked the streets.

The crews counted, measured, photographed and evaluated 1,761 trees between June 7-17.

These weren't just hobbyists.

Working meticulously to compile data for the 2015 Town of Taos Tree Survey, the crews revealed the growth of an invasive species, raising concerns about the future of the community's urban forest.

Siberian Elms accounted for 29.7 percent of the trees surveyed, making the oft-maligned *Ulmus pumila* by far the most common species.

The preponderance of Siberian elms points to what a forester who helped compile the data says is a lack of diversity.

Siberian Elms were introduced in neighborhoods across the state to create canopies, according to certified arborist Ben Wright, who is working on a case study of Siberian elms in New Mexico.

The trees caught on too well, he said, to the point Siberian elms are now considered an invasive species.

They appear to be sprouting up with relative swiftness, with Siberian elms accounting for many of the younger trees surveyed.

But one species should not make up such a large share of an urban forest, according to Wright.

If a disease were to make its way into the elms of Taos, a big piece of the canopy would be decimated.

With that, neighborhoods would lose the tree's benefits such as stormwater mitigation, energy savings from shade and erosion prevention.

The trees cannot be removed all at once, either, for the same reasons.

Wright would like to see the elms gradually replaced.

"We need to think 10, 20 years ahead and prepare for a more diverse urban forest," Wright explained.

Diversity in both species and age is key, he argued.

Cottonwoods comprised approximately 7.5 percent of the trees surveyed, for example, but were among the oldest and Wright said many appear to be nearing the end of their lives.

Ten percent of the trees surveyed were found to be in poor condition while another 2 percent were categorized as dead or dying. Seventy-two trees were determined to be hazardous. The survey recommended further examination to determine if pruning was needed or if some of the trees should be removed.

The tree survey's data is a first step towards diversifying Taos' tree canopy, according to town facilities director Steve Kennebeck.

"The idea is to have a plan for the future of the urban forest," he said.

The tree survey was funded with a grant from New Mexico State Forestry Division administered by the town government.

The Tree Board, formed by proclamation of the town council, aims to parlay the data into policies and resources.

The board is working on a town tree ordinance separate from the municipality's landscaping code, for example, and hopes to launch a website with information on tree care and maintenance.

Kennebeck said the board would also like the town to hire a forester who can provide expertise in the municipality's handling of trees, from cutting back growth along roads to planning public works projects.

In the meantime, Wright suggested property owners can play a big role in fostering a healthier urban forest by properly grooming trees and abandoning the practice of "topping."

"It's very common. It's kind of a tradition but it really hurts trees," he said.

Wright also emphasized selecting trees that are appropriate for particular sites such as species that are not invasive and are more likely to fare well in the local climate.

There is more data to be collected, too, he said. While the tree survey this summer and another in Kit Carson Park completed by Rocky Mountain Youth Corps has provided information on 2,299 trees, that is believed to be less than half the trees in the historic district.

The survey should be an ongoing project and expand to include other areas of town, Wright said.

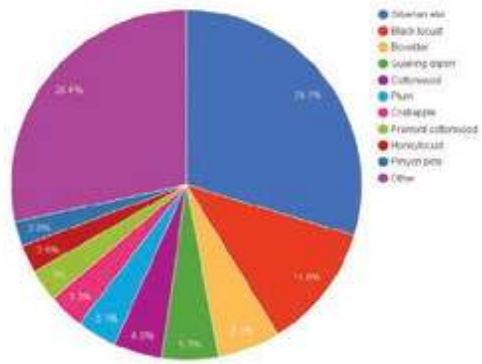
After all, there's no telling what crews might find.

Asked what trees the teams found remarkable, Wright mentioned a pair of unlikely entries on the project's sprawling database: two Osage orange trees on Bent Street.

Besides, he said, paying close attention to a community's trees brings people closer to facets of the landscape that are often taken for granted.

"Doing something like a tree survey really connects people to their urban forest," Wright said.

Species in 2015 Town of Taos Tree Survey



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