

Sierra Club Tree Trimming Panel

On Tuesday, Jan. 8, from 7 to 8:30 p.m., at the Church of the Covenant, 501 S. Mendenhall St., the Sierra Club Piedmont Plateau Group hosted a panel of three local residents and experts discussing how Greensboro citizens can work with the city and Duke Energy to create new tree-cutting guidelines. The panel members were **Michelle Ferrier**, a professor at Elon University who personally experience clear cutting of the trees behind her home; **Drew Perry**, a resident of the Westerwood neighborhood; and **Ken Bridel**, the stewardship director at the Piedmont Land Conservancy. The meeting was a response to recent “clear cutting” and aggressive tree trimming being conducted in Greensboro on behalf of Duke Energy, especially that done most recently in the Westerwood neighborhood. The meeting was well attended with an estimated 75 to 100 people present. Among those attending were Greensboro City Councilmen Zach Methany (District 3), Nancy Vaughn (At Large), and Marikay Abuzuaiter (At Large). A reporter from TV Channel 14 was present. At the time of the meeting, the Greensboro City Council had asked Duke Energy to temporarily stand down from further tree cutting until the matter could be further discussed.

Meeting Summary

Reasons for the Current Tree Trimming

In 1978 the City of Greensboro signed a 50-year franchise agreement with Duke Energy for it to supply power to the city and to maintain the power lines. The franchise agreement also gives Duke the authority to trim trees that interfere with power lines. This franchise remains in effect until 2028.

For many years, Duke Energy neglected tree trimming. This has allowed many trees to grow large and close to power lines. Trees were often trimmed only once every 10 to 15 years. However, federal law now makes power companies responsible for damages due to power outages. This law, passed in 2005 in response to weather-related catastrophes, was not truly enforced until 2008. The fines applied to power companies are huge (i.e. millions of dollars). Therefore, it is now very much in the interest of the power companies, to take action -- such as tree trimming -- to avoid outages.

How the Trees are Trimmed

Duke Energy uses contractors that they approve to trim the trees. Several people in attendance questioned the knowledge level of the workers. Typically, Duke’s staff arborist is not present during the trimming. In general, Duke Energy can trim what it deems is right, but the contractors are instructed to adhere to the ASTM 300 Pruning Guidelines. These guidelines say, among other things, that trees must be thinned and not simply topped, These guidelines also state that if 25% or more of the tree canopy must be removed, the *entire* tree should be cut down since such severe trimming jeopardizes the health of the remaining tree. The default utility clearance in the guidelines is designated at 15 feet. (Trees therefore can be trimmed so that limbs are 15 feet away from the existing power lines.)

Suggestions for Change

The panel experts and members of the audience made the following suggestions as a way of improving the tree trimming situation:

Greensboro’s tree preservation ordinance needs to be rewritten and strengthened. Unlike ordinances in nearby cities such as Durham, Cary, Raleigh and Chapel Hill, our ordinance does not state a clearance distance. These cities have written into their ordinances utility clearance distances less than the ASTM standard of 15 feet. The ordinance could possibly also mandate more frequent trimming by utilities. So long as the revised ordinance is able to work with the franchise agreement, Duke would be required to adhere to the local ordinance. The city council members present said they will rewrite the Greensboro tree preservation ordinance.

Homeowners can have their trees trimmed at their own expense. However, it is critical to work with Duke Energy to use one of the vendors that they approve to do the trimming/thinning. Homeowners must coordinate this effort with Duke from the start in order to avoid costly cutting that Duke does not officially recognize and does nothing to save their trees.

Working toward a “No Tree Trimming” result is not a viable option. In some places, the wrong type of tree was planted under power lines. No matter how they are trimmed, these trees will never be appropriate for their current locations.

Moving the power lines underground will only work for new development and will not save established trees. Duke Energy says that they would have to completely remove *all* existing trees to bury existing power lines in established neighborhoods. Trimming is a more cost-effective than burying lines.

Another suggestion to Duke Energy would be to reroute power lines to avoid specific treasured old-growth hardwoods. This process is currently used after weather catastrophes and might be an attractive alternative to Duke.

Citizens have called for Duke to improve their communication with residents/customers. There needs to be improvement in advance communications via door knockers, etc., prior to tree trimming. Residents need to have enough advance notice to consider alternatives to save their trees.

Citizens also want an honest appeal process to be put into place. Currently residents/consumers have no recourse and many feel their complaints are not fairly addressed.

Certificates of Appropriateness (COAs) might be a way to regulate the type of tree trimming that is permitted.

Residents have questioned whether Duke Energy should be able to leave the wood/branches/limbs cut down for homeowners to remove at homeowner expense. This seems especially unfair since Duke Energy has neglected the tree trimming for so long resulting in a very large amount of debris left to deal with. Experts on the panel noted that Duke is a very profitable company and should bear this burden rather than passing it along to consumers (who are also being asked to accept an increase in electric rates).

Action Residents Can Take

Contact city council members and the mayor -- the city council members present all agreed that it is important for citizens to email, write and phone the City Council members to voice their concerns. The city is going up against the largest utility in the nation, and needs lots of evidence of support from city residents. The council does plan to rewrite the tree ordinance and will try to strengthen it greatly.

Contact others such as the states Utility Board, your state representative and senators, the governor. (It was noted at the meeting that the new governor worked for Duke Energy and has appointed many advisors with direct links to Duke Energy.) Insist that Duke Energy adhere to good business ethics and behave like a good citizen of the city and state. Insist that Duke Energy treat all cities in the state in the same ethical manner.

Attend City Council Meetings – Make your concern visible. Get local media to film and photograph crowds of people who want change.

Keep the issue in the news – Signs, letters to the editor, etc. will keep this issue in the limelight and put pressure on Duke Energy. They do not want bad PR while they are trying to win a rate increase.

Take photos of existing trees on your property so that you have photographic evidence of their current appearance. If you need to dispute any future tree trimming, these photos could be very useful.

-- Respectfully submitted by Judy Horn, 114 S. Mendenhall St.