

Preserving Street Trees

All across Connecticut, citizens are protesting drastic tree pruning and removal by the state's major electric companies, United Illuminating (UI) and Connecticut Light and Power (CL&P), along streets and roadways. Since 2011, a series of devastating storms has downed trees and interrupted electric, telephone, and cable service to customers all across Connecticut, leaving them in the cold and dark. In response to the storms, CL&P has expanded its use of what it calls "Enhanced Tree Trimming" (ETT) and engaged in more aggressive tree cutting, which it calls "Enhanced Tree Removal" (ETR). UI is also beginning to use ETT and ETR instead of its prior pruning standards, which left U- or V-shaped openings in the trees for the lines. The results of this pruning could be awkward, but it did at least preserve a tree canopy.

While the objections have for the most part been couched in terms of beauty, property values or environmental impact, trees are an integral part of Connecticut's historic landscape as well. Since the late 18th century citizens have planted trees to line streets and roads, frame buildings, and ornament landscapes (see page 16). From the elms of the New Haven Green to sugar maples along country lanes, trees represent

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The Garden Club of New Haven produced this rendering (right) to show how tree pruning would affect the character of Edwards Street, in the Whitney Avenue National Register district. But in fact the rendering does not show the unsightly wires which would be exposed.

Garden Club of New Haven

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As shown on the cover of *Connecticut Preservation News*, a rendering by the Garden Club of New Haven shows how tree trimming would affect the character of Edwards Street, in the Whitney Avenue National Register district. In fact, the result would be even worse, since the rendering does not show the unsightly wires which would be exposed (images: Garden Club of New Haven).

ment landscapes. From the elms of the New Haven Green to sugar maples along country lanes, trees represent generations of efforts to shape and improve the state's landscape.

The work has had an immediate impact on historic areas. In Wethersfield, the town stopped work in August, 2013, after CL&P removed several trees on the Broad Street Green and drastically pruned trees on Hartford Avenue, both in Wethersfield's local historic district. In Pawcatuck, residents protested CL&P's plan to remove 50 trees along Moss Street. In Hamden, Mayor Scott Jackson (a trustee of the Connecticut Trust) asked UI to postpone a pilot tree-trimming program after hundreds turned out to oppose the program.

The new standards, ETT and ETR, establish a rigid no-grow zone within eight feet on either side of power lines and extending from the ground to the sky. Any branches or trees within that zone must be removed.

A wide range of advocates, from environmentalists to business owners to preservationists and landscape architects, object that the new guidelines are an overreaction, a drastic, one-size-fits-all approach that fails to take into account the health of individual trees, the differences among species, and effects of trees' surroundings.

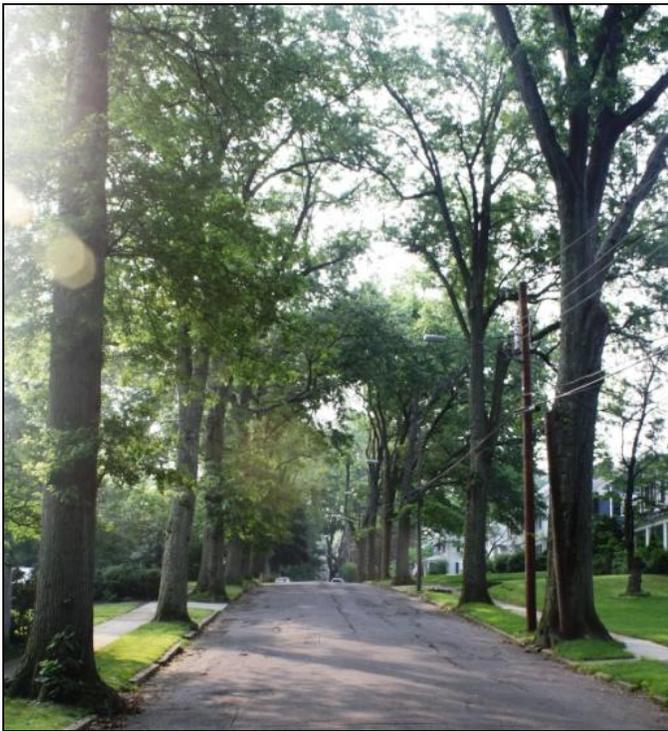
If carried out, activists maintain, the work could drastically harm the character of Connecticut's streets, towns, and landscapes. In New Haven, the Garden Club of New Haven estimates that the UI plan could result in the loss of about half the city's street trees.

The Garden Club has taken a leading role in pushing for a more nuanced approach. Mary-Michelle Hirschhoff, the Garden Club's spokesperson (and a former chairman of the Connecticut Trust), points to the State Vegetation Management Task Force's recommendations, which call for a long-term transition to what it calls a "right tree/right

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Epitomizing the suburban ideal, Swarthmore Street, in Hamden, is shaded by giant oaks (photo: C. Wigren).

Finally, towns and cities may consider passing ordinances to govern tree pruning or removal by utilities. In New Haven, alder Michael Stratton has introduced such an ordinance.

In response to public objections, UI delayed implementation of its plans. At the company's request, PURA will hold technical meetings with both UI and CL&P, as well as public information sessions on March 5 and 6. PURA is expected to issue a final decision soon after the meetings to establish its standards for tree pruning and removal by the utilities.

"The issue is not that we have to choose between keeping trees or protecting the power supply," says the Garden Club's Ms. Hirschhoff. "It's really a question of balance—protecting power reliability and retaining the scenic and historic character of our cities and towns, as well as the many other economic, environmental, societal, and health benefits of trees."

It will be PURA's task to find the proper balance among these public values.

For more information, including summary of the law and recommendations for citizen action, visit <http://www.gardenclubofnewhaven.org/>. This article originally appeared in the March/April, 2014, issue of Connecticut Preservation News.

Sugar maples line Clapboard Hill Road in Guilford's Dudleytown National Register district (photo: National Register of Historic Places).



place" roadside forest, one that takes into account the species, condition, growth rate, and location of trees and focuses on removing trees that actually are hazardous because they are dead, extensively decayed or structurally weak.

Few preservation measures directly address street trees, but other means are available. For trees in the public right-of-way, abutting property owners must be notified of proposed tree pruning or removal and have the right to object to the tree warden, for town roads, or to the Department of Transportation, for state highways. The property owner or the electric utility can appeal the tree warden's or DOT's decision to the Public Utility Regulatory Authority (PURA). For trees on private property, owners have an absolute right to refuse consent for pruning or removal if they disagree with the company's plans, except where trees or branches are clearly hazardous—touching wires, for instance.

In addition, the power companies are required to work with town tree wardens, who can refuse permits for removing or pruning trees within public rights-of-way, again subject to appeals to PURA. The Garden Club of New Haven recommends that citizens ask tree wardens to post all trees scheduled for removal or substantial pruning and hold public meetings on planned work.