9 Local Government Perceptions of Urban Forestry

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The urban forest is a decidedly local issue. The size, impact, and benefits of the urban forest vary depending upon the local ecosystem, planning, and presence of a professional urban forester and staff, community commitment to an urban forest, and political understanding and political will to provide for and support a viable urban forest. Consistent with the vitality of the urban forest is political understanding of the importance of the urban forest, and a knowledge gap often exists between urban foresters and their local government leaders that is often large. For example, Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the potential disparity between urban foresters and political leaders views of the urban forest.

Fig. 1. Urban forester’s view of the urban forest.
Herein lies the dichotomy for urban foresters: How to move political leaders to a more enlightened view of the urban forest. Specifically, urban foresters would ideally prefer to have politicians wholly supportive of the urban forest. This is a naive, if not admirable goal. While interviewing local government officials in two communities about the urban forest, one mayor stated, “I really don’t know anything about the urban forest.” However, the mayor in the other community used terms such as “carbon sequestration, storm water runoff, cooling effects.” These two responses demonstrate the large gap between what different politicians know about the urban forest. From a policy perspective politicians may be even less knowledgeable. Certainly it would be difficult for a politician to suggest urban forests are not important, yet at the same time given an opportunity to increase the tax base with a new mall or factory at the expense of a few trees does not seem politically or environmentally inappropriate. In a recent report from CNN it was reported that over a 10 year period in a study of 448 urban areas there was a 10 percent decrease in the tree canopy.

One mistake frequently made by urban foresters is to over estimate the knowledge and understanding of community decision makers. Although much work has been done to assist urban foresters to sell their message (USFS, 2001; Macie & Hermansen, 2003; Center for Urban Forest Research, 2003), little effort has been made to understand how policy makers go about gaining knowledge, understanding, and commitment to the urban forest. This chapter examines how community policy makers look at the urban forest. It draws on previous research by the authors (McLean & Jensen, 2003a, 2003b). The absence of research about how community policy makers view the urban forest has led to statements to urban foresters such as “demand that good policy be established.” Yet, what is defined as