

City of Northampton, MA  
Public Shade Tree Commission (PSTC)

October 7, 2020

Meeting Minutes

Submitted by: Beth A. Kaplowitt

**Meeting Called to Order**

Susan Lofthouse, Chair called the meeting to order at 4:32 PM, and announced that this virtual meeting would be recorded to the Cloud via the Zoom platform.

Members present and absent/introductions:

<b>Member</b>	<b>Present</b>	<b>Time if arriving late or leaving early</b>
Susan Lofthouse, Chair	X	
Marilyn Castriotta, Vice Chair	Absent	
Molly Hale	X	
Jennifer Werner	X	
Rob Postel	X	Arrived at 4:04 p.m.
David Lukens	X	
<b>Staff &amp; Visitors</b>	<b>Present</b>	<b>Time if arriving late or leaving early</b>
Richard Parasiliti, Tree Warden	X	
Beth A. Kaplowitt, DPW Clerk	X	

**Public Comment**

- None.

❖ A motion was proposed and seconded and a roll call vote was taken. There was no discussion.

Motion	Motion By:	Seconded By:	Vote:
To move the 8 <sup>th</sup> item on the Agenda up to become the 3rd item on the Agenda and to discuss the letter from Lilly Lombard.	Jen Werner	Molly Hale	Yes 5, No 0, Abstain 0

**Mayor’s Proposed Administrative Order to Amend Public Shade Tree Commission Organizational Structure**

- Susan said that she received an email from founding PSTC member/previous Chair Lilly Lombard at 1:16 p.m. today. She then read the letter out loud to enter it into the record. The letter is attached to the minutes.
- Susan summarized the Mayor’s order and then the members read the Order.
- The proposed name change from Public Shade Tree Commission to Urban Forestry Commission has been supported over time by all.
- The reduction of the number of Commissioners from 7 to 6 would be part of a process to bring the PSTC into alignment with the Transportation and Parking Commission and the Energy and Sustainability Commission.

- Rich said that Mayor's reason for wanting an Ex-officio Chair for the other Committees was that they are multi-member bodies made up of different organizations within the City (Councilors, residents and appointed people from different departments), and that this could lead to conflicts when a Councilor is Chair because Executive Branch staff cannot be governed by a Legislative Board.
- In 2015, the Mayor eliminated the Board of Public Works because they had power over the DPW budget and were able to set rates. This body should not have had that power over Executive Branch people.
- Molly suggested that this rationale would not apply to the PSTC since it is comprised entirely of public citizens. Rich said that all members of the PSTC are appointed and serve at the choice of the Legislative Branch. The Tree Warden is an employee of the DPW, so the PSTC must go through the DPW. The Tree Warden has input but no vote on things like the Planting Plan, but he has to run it through the DPW Director and the Mayor for approval.
- Rich said that he is advocating both for himself and for future Tree Wardens. He thinks that this proposed model would help strengthen the PSTC. Since the committee serves at the pleasure of the Executive Branch, it essentially "has no teeth."
- If the Tree Warden became the Ex-officio Chair, it would strengthen and solidify the working relationship between the PSTC and the Executive Branch. Since each member serves at the pleasure of the Mayor, the PTSC can only serve in an advisory capacity.
- Jen said that she appreciates the concerns presented in Lilly's letter, but she sees an advantage to the Mayor's proposal since it would solidify the Tree Warden's position and make it harder for any future budget cuts to lead to the elimination of the Tree Warden position.
- Discussion continued considering future possible scenarios that could arise with a completely different set of members and a new Tree Warden, and about the way Northampton currently stands out in contrast with many other communities because of the close coordination that it has between citizens, the Tree Warden, the DPW and the Mayor.
- Rich said that the Tree Warden must work in symbiosis with the Committee. Susan said that the Tree Warden is legally responsible for all the trees, and that having the Tree Warden as a part of the Commission has helped to make the PSTC strong. She also acknowledged Lilly's concerns that citizens won't have a voice.
- There was further discussion about the role of individual PSTC members and of the PSTC maintaining an independent voice under each scenario. Also, since the Tree Warden would only be one of six or seven votes, the PSTC would not be censored or edited by the proposed change. Concerns were voiced about not wanting to do anything that would infringe on the PSTC's role.

At 4:58 p.m., strong wind/hail/rain storms moved through the area, which caused all members to have brief or extended power/internet outages, which caused all members to drop in and out, or stay out permanently, from the Zoom meeting.

At 5:45 p.m., enough members had reestablished their Zoom connections for there to again be a quorum present, and so the meeting was resumed.

- Discussion continued about how the Commission's votes might be presented to the Mayor if the Ex-officio Chair disagreed with the rest of the members, and how much of a loss of power it could be for the citizens in other situations, such as the setting of the Agenda and the times allotted for each topic.
- Worst case scenarios were also discussed, in which for example, the Tree Warden and the Mayor were aligned and were not receptive to citizen input, which would leave the citizen members unable to prevail. It is only by cooperation of all parties that things can really happen. The PSTC and its members are strongest when they are collaborating with the DPW, the Tree Warden, and

other Departments. Having a powerful citizen Chair doesn't really matter if collaboration isn't happening. Individual members can always speak out as individuals, but not as PSTC members. This situation would not really be any different than it is now. Also, the Planting Plan, the PSTC's priorities, and any publicity or press releases all must go through the Mayor first now, which again wouldn't change.

- Jen asked Rich if he felt that he could realistically carry out the duties of the Chair, and he said and Susan agreed, that the Vice Chair would probably need to take on a larger administrative role, as well as fostering communication and some other tasks. Jen suggested that this might lead to more collaboration, which could lead to more checks and balances, and that this would be a positive thing.
- New questions were then discussed about the different hierarchies that might arise under the proposed changes, especially if there were differences of opinion between different parties, such as what role the Vice Chair might play in such a scenario. There were concerns expressed that the proposed change might lead to more inner conflict within the Commission, and that that should be carefully considered.
- Discussion continued to try to clarify the timeframe that applies to this decision, taking into account the date of the next City Council meeting and the expressed concerns of various parties.

**Review/approve minutes of 9/2/20 & 9/16/20 meetings**

- The minutes from September 2, 2020 were re-read and the amendments were re-affirmed by Commission members.
  - ❖ A motion was proposed and seconded and a roll call vote was taken. There was no discussion.

Motion	Motion By:	Seconded By:	Vote:
To reaffirm the September 16, 2020 meeting approval of the September 2, 2020 minutes as amended.	Rob Postel	Susan Lofthouse	Yes 4, No 0, Abstain 0

- The minutes from the September 16, 2020 were read and amended by Commission members.
  - ❖ A motion was proposed and seconded and a roll call vote was taken. There was no discussion.

Motion	Motion By:	Seconded By:	Vote:
To approve the September 16, 2020 minutes as amended.	Molly Hale	Rob Postel	Yes 3, No 0, Abstain 1

Molly and Sue suggested that the rest of the Agenda needed to be tabled due to the lateness of the hour.

- A motion was proposed and seconded and a roll call vote was taken. There was no discussion.

Motion	Motion By:	Seconded By:	Vote:
To table the rest of the 10/7/20 PSTC Agenda items due to power outages that delayed the second half of the meeting.	Jen Werner	Molly Hale	Yes 4, No 0, Abstain 0

**Vice Chair Report**

- This item was tabled.

**Tree Warden Report**

- This item was tabled.

**Review of Commission Charter**

- This item was tabled.

**Ongoing Projects Status**

- Planting Plan Fall 2020
  - ❖ This item was tabled.
- Downtown Tree Siting
  - ❖ This item was tabled.

**Any other business not anticipated by the Chair**

- This item was tabled.

**To Do List**

- This item was tabled.

Motion	Motion By:	Seconded By:	Vote:
To adjourn.	Jen Werner	Rob Postel	Yes 4, No 0, Abstain 0

Meeting adjourned at 6:28 p.m.