

## **The BLT Ordinance**

**Buck Abbey, ASLA**  
Robert Reich School of Landscape Architecture  
Louisiana State University  
**Green Law Research Project**

“Cities around the world are making major investments  
to infrastructure, creating jobs and improving their quality of life.”  
Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Mayor of New York City. 2008



### **Sustainable Urban Forests**

We have written about the **Planyc** sustainability program launched by Mayor Bloomberg in 2007. New Yorkers understand the future of their city is based on making the city sustainable while meeting the challenges posed by an environment under stress due to growth and development.

But other cities, smaller cities across the country, are doing some of the same kind of thinking. They are passing green laws that will preserve, protect and rebuild their urban forests, public open spaces and community parks. One such urbanizing area is Gwinnett County, Georgia, located in suburban Atlanta.

### **The BLT Ordinance**

The Gwinnett County tree ordinance, referred to locally as the BLT Ordinance (Buffer, Landscape & Tree Ordinance) is one of the best examples of a green law moving toward that class of green laws referred to as ‘super tree laws.’ This special class of green law is based upon sustainable practices, combine both tree management with landscape requirements and facilitate tree preservation. (Gwinnett County Municipal Code, Chapter 118, Vegetation, Sec. 118.1, 1987, amended 2001, 2003, 2007.)

This ordinance has been modified several times since its enactment in 1987. In each instance it has become more tailored to sustainability. The most recent amendment, December 2007, enhances tree preservation standards for residential and commercial property as well as street tree plantings areas on public property fronting private development.. The BLT now requires a *tree density standard* and tree canopy calculations for each development project. In addition, the revision now provides a *tree banking option* and allows more credit for preserving existing trees.

### **The Technical Standards**

The purpose of BLT is to preserve and enhance the County's natural environment and to protect its urban forest canopy to the extent that all development meets a uniform standard of canopy coverage, landscaping and buffering of conflicting land uses.

Technical standards include the design of street yards, buffers, screens, and parking lot plantings, all of which are major components of Gwinnett public policy. In addition, the BLT calls for water efficient landscape design and the use of native plant material species.

The foundation of the ordinance is built around three main purposes. They include the directives to “preserve and enhance the County's natural environment; the preservation, protection and planting of trees; and the provision of natural and/or planted buffers” between dissimilar land uses and zoning districts. These are all sustainable practices.

The code defines several new urban forestry concepts not seen in most community tree laws. The program quantifiably rests on tree calculations where diameter in inches is converted to tree density units (TDU).

### **Canopy Preservation Standard**

In this community the urban forest is to be sustained by ensuring a benchmark for urban forest canopy coverage over the County. The canopy coverage standard in Gwinnett is set at 16 TDU (tree density units/acre). The calculations for this are very simple. First the

area of the site is determined. All required buffer areas, servitudes and detention ponds over one (1) acre are subtracted to determine total area of development site. This number derived in acres is multiplied by 16 to determine the required TDU for the site

The site is surveyed to determine the total number of DBA caliper inches of trees to be preserved. Appendix B & C from the BLT are used to determine the total TDU that will be subtracted from the required TDU's. Appendix B & C provide a TDU factor for all tree diameters from 3 inches to 50 inches DBH for preserved trees from 1 inch to 14 inches for replacement trees.

### **Administration of the Code**

But as written before in this column, the most important thing about any green law is the method and tools by which it is administered. A tree ordinance or landscape code with no enforcement procedure will not be effective.

The BLT is administered by the Director of Planning and Development though agents who work directly with the general public and development community. According to Article 8 of this code, three common administrative methods are used to administer the BLT. They include inspections, plan review and the issuance or revocation of permits. The landscape code applies to one or more permits that are required to develop property. They include Development Permits, Grading Permits, Clearing & Grubbing Permits, Building Permits and Occupancy Permits.

Landscape, Tree Preservation and Replacement Plans are submitted for review and approval prior to receiving a Development or Clearing Permit. Trees can not be removed without the landscape plan and clearing permit. A citation, summons, or accusation may be issued by the inspector on a standard ticket form for any infraction of the landscape code. Violation may result in a fine of \$100 to \$1000 a day as well as sixty days in jail upon conviction in court.

The BLT Ordinance is worthy of being considered as a model that could be used to lead other communities toward a sustainable urban forest. There is a lot to learn by reading the *Gwinnett BLT Ordinance* and its companion documents *BLT Ordinance Handbook* and *Gwinnett Development Regulations*. These documents known collectively as the Design Manual are available at [www.gwinnettcountry.com](http://www.gwinnettcountry.com) .

Word Count 833 V4 edited copy

###

-30-



**Fig. No. 1.** Parking Lot Detention, a common landscape code feature in many cities.

