

URBAN FORESTRY AND VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

by John Ball

Abstract. Urban foresters are relying on volunteers to fulfill some of the goals of their programs. While utilizing volunteers can add much to a program, the mismanagement of this same resource can lead to problems. Volunteers should have the same quality of administration as the paid workers. Some concepts of volunteer management are discussed through the use of a real example.

During the last decade many urban foresters have had to contend with budgets that have failed to keep pace with needs. One way of reducing the impact of budget cuts is to utilize volunteers. However, many city foresters are reluctant to involve volunteers in their departments. Despite the attractive appeal of "free" help, many say they cannot afford the problems that come with the volunteers. Several city foresters have told me they have tried using volunteers, but volunteer workers were unreliable. The most common remark was "the volunteer gets the credit if a project is successful and we get the blame if it fails and it usually fails."

This attitude is unfortunate. There are many advantages to working with volunteers, advantages that extend beyond the obvious monetary ones. By volunteering, citizens may become more aware of the operation of the city forestry department. They can become advocates for your program, informed citizens carrying your concerns to city government officials and the general public.

A major stumbling block to working with volunteers is that few urban foresters have had training in this area of management. Many university urban forestry programs require labor or personnel management courses, but working with volunteers requires different skills (Wilson, 1976). One of the best ways we can become better volunteer managers is to learn from experiences of others. Here is a volunteer experience of one medium-size midwestern city.

This volunteer project involved a city park widely known for its formally trimmed shrub and floral displays. The park was very popular for picnics and weddings and the surrounding homes took

great pride in the park. The gardens were expensive to maintain. They required the care of a fulltime gardener and several seasonal laborers. When the budgets were reduced, the city retrenched these park positions. The areas receiving intensive maintenance, such as the garden flower beds and hedges, soon deteriorated. After a few years of neglect the city decided to eliminate a large portion of the gardens and replace it with turf. This decision was made without public input but was based in part on citizen complaints about the park's unkept appearance. City crews were dispatched to the park and began removing some of the perennials and shrubs. The work proceeded for a week; then several citizens asked the workers what they were doing in the park. The realization of what was occurring developed into a public outcry, newspaper articles were written, and a citizen park committee was organized.

The park committee, organized by several citizens, was made up of city officials, garden club members, and homeowners from the surrounding area. During the fall and winter the committee developed a plan to renovate the beds and shrubs. The plan called for volunteer work weekends to begin the following spring. The volunteers would begin by clearing debris from the wooded area, then prune the trees and shrubs in the more formal portions of the park. Tools would be provided by the city with city crews removing the brush piles during the week. After this work was completed the garden beds would be assigned to individual garden clubs. Each club would have one or more beds to plant and maintain. The city would provide some annual flowers and one city worker to water and care for the beds and the formal areas.

The first spring work weekend was a success. Approximately thirty people attended and the woods was soon cleared of fallen limbs and brush. The local television station sent out a camera crew and a favorable show of citizen-city cooperation

was aired on the evening news. The following weekend sessions were not as successful. Only one citizen showed up for the second session and none for the third. Later that spring some garden club groups and individuals were assigned to various flower beds, but some groups and individuals backed out at the last minute resulting in gaps in the garden. Several individuals had to step in at the last minute and maintain more beds than they had originally intended. Also by this time the park committee had split into several groups each acting independently of the other. Suggestions of adding picnic tables or parking spaces was vetoed by one group or the other and the renovation of the park came almost to a halt.

What went wrong? What could have been done to increase the efficiency of the volunteer committee and workforce? Let us dissect this experience and critically examine some of the decisions made and their outcomes. The first error began when the city crew began removing some plants in the beds. As Tate (1976) pointed out in his article on urban forestry and public relations, informed citizens will accept change easier if allowed an opportunity to express their opinions. It is difficult to force external goals on people (Ames, 1980). By having the city workers disseminate the decision the city was foregoing the chance to present it in a less volatile setting. Now to assure their involvement, citizens formed a park committee.

While committees can be a useful advisory and political tool to a urban forester this one had several serious flaws. To work effectively with citizens you must have mutual trust and an open exchange of expectations (Zaltman and Duncan, 1977). The volunteer effort must also have broad-based community participation (Cole, 1979). The volunteer committee lacked these essential ingredients. The committee formed out of mistrust of the city's intentions and membership was composed of homeowners from the surrounding neighborhood and garden clubs.

Some might argue that the park committee should not have been accepted by the city, that the complaints should have been referred to the park department. But there was value in having the city accept and participate in this committee. The use of volunteers can help promote trust in city government (Weegar, 1983). By soliciting

volunteers you are saying your department has nothing to hide from the public. The formation of the citizen-city committee dispelled some of the mistrust of the city park department.

Much of the mistrust arose from the city making a decision without providing information on how the decision was made. Hence several committee members came to the first meeting with solutions prior to understanding the situation. During the second meeting the city presented data supporting their decision. Working with the citizens on the committee the city reached a compromise where the park would not be drastically altered, but volunteers would provide much of the maintenance.

The park committee made a major, though common, error in working with volunteers. Volunteer managers are sometimes unrealistic about the desires of other possible volunteers (Wilson, 1976). Because of the homogeneous and biased composition of the committee, they were not aware that everyone may not have placed as much importance on the park. For example, some committee members assumed many of the area garden clubs would be interested in helping out. Some were, but others did not want to be involved. When it came time to have the various clubs take responsibility for a bed, several beds did not have a sponsor. This same problem occurred with the work weekends. Citizens from other areas of the community did not see the value of the park in the same way as the committee members, hence there was little outside interest in volunteering.

This problem could have been minimized by seeking a broader base of participation. Committee members from other backgrounds or areas may have had suggestions on how to interest more people in the project. For example, many downtown workers would drive over to the park to enjoy their lunch. Unfortunately there were very few parking or picnic sites. When the city representative on the committee suggested expanding these sites, several committee members vetoed the idea because they wanted to discourage outsiders from using the park. It is difficult to interest people in volunteering when they do not have a stake in the project. By narrowing the beneficiaries of the park renovation the com-

mittee was also limiting its pool of potential volunteers.

The actual work of renovating the park started with a large group of citizens and garden clubs. However, this number dwindled within a few weeks. Why? Motivation, or in this case, the lack of it. According to the Motivation-Hygiene theory, a task, be it paid or voluntary, can be divided into two factors, hygienic and motivators (Herzberg, 1966). Hygienic factors relate to the work environment. They include working conditions, administration, and supervision. The volunteers expect safe and comfortable working conditions along with good supervision. The absences of these factors will dissatisfy volunteers but including them will not motivate since they are expected. Motivators relate to the work itself. They include challenge, responsibility, and recognition. These factors will increase the motivation the worker has towards the volunteer experience.

An important hygienic factor that was missing from the volunteer effort was supervision. A volunteer effort, either committee or workforce, requires supervision and administration from the city. People volunteering on a regular basis, such as the garden clubs and individuals caring for the beds, should be treated the same as paid employees (Greer, 1984). This would include a written job description for each individual or club so they understand what is expected from them and where they are in the chain of command. Many of the volunteers were not sure whom to report to. Several committee members assumed this was their responsibility and often conflicting commands were given. This was very discouraging to the volunteers performing the work. Motivators were also absent. Several individuals dominated the park committee and would not delegate responsibility. Many committee members became discouraged by the lack of opportunity for responsibility and recognition.

Working with volunteers can be very frustrating. But volunteer efforts can succeed as shown by

Cole (1979) and Collins and Munsell (1981). If you would like to learn about a successful volunteer system I suggest starting with Weegar's (1983) article on volunteerism in Hurst, Texas. While the article does not address urban forestry, it presents an example of recruiting and assigning volunteers in various city positions.

There is a general reluctance to working with volunteers and though this experience was initially discouraging, I still recommend it. Two years after the park renovation was started, the gardens and grounds are better than they have been in years. Despite the initial problems, the work was done, mostly by a small group of very dedicated volunteers. These individuals formed a group with one person serving as the communicator to the city. The city supplies some plants and help, but the group does most of the maintenance. Because of these people the effort has been a success, and the city once again has a beautiful park.

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