Focus Group Summary – Madison, Wis.
Residential Property Owner Trees and Urban Green Space Survey

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I.   BACKGROUND

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) is partnering with the USDA Forest Service (USFS), Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) program, to pre-test and pilot the upcoming USFS FIA Urban National Woodland Owner Survey (NWOS). The NWOS has historically surveyed rural landowners to better understand how they manage their woodlands, and the program is now adding a national survey for urban landowners to learn how they manage and perceive the urban forest.

In Wisconsin, 70% of the population lives in urban areas and directly benefits from an estimated 42.8 million urban trees, according to a 2012 pilot study. To provide a more thorough understanding of the behaviors and interests of urban residential property owners, the urban NWOS is being piloted in four Wisconsin cities, including Madison. The urban survey will complement the developing Wisconsin Urban Forest Assessment Program, which continuously aggregates existing urban tree inventory data and assesses the urban tree canopy.

On December 17, 2015, we facilitated three focus groups in Madison to pre-test the survey instrument and to gather additional insights from urban forestry professionals and residential property owners. We hosted one focus group of 10 local professionals to review the survey and to discuss how the survey could benefit their work. We additionally hosted two focus groups of 13 total Madison residential property owners. Each focus group lasted two hours.

The section below is a qualitative summary of the residential property owners' discussion in response to a set of open-ended questions, and the section following it is a quantitative summary of the focus group participants' responses to closed-ended survey questions. Please note that with a small sample of only 13 participants, the summaries below are not representative of the larger Madison population, but do provide insights into the usability of each survey question.

II.   SUMMARY OF RESIDENT FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Madison Special Charge
In August 2015, the Madison City Council adopted a monthly Special Charge, to be collected from all real property in the city to support urban forestry services and to recover increasing costs. To better understand Madison residents' attitudes, we asked open-ended questions about their familiarity with the charge, their questions about the charge, their concerns and perceived benefits, and their level of support for the charge.

Only one participant was familiar with the Special Charge. As a result, most of the discussion was speculation about 'What is the Special Charge?' Participants asked when and where the fee is charged, including whether it might be part of their tax bill.

A few participants said they would support the fee if they were told its benefits upfront. One of these participants also expressed concern about the personal financial strain imposed by the Special Charge and increased taxes in Madison this year: *"Yes, we should do that. It's worth it. But then [...] we can't absorb another increase of any sort [...]"*

Questions and comments included:

> "A tax? A fee?"
> "Is the 'special' a euphemism for something else?"
> "How much is it? How often is it assessed? What happens with the money?"
> "Is it based on how many trees are in the yard?"
> "Aren't we responsible for taking care of our terrace trees that are on our property?"

Arborists

To better understand residents' familiarity with the services provided by arborists, we asked multiple open-ended questions, including their experience working with arborists, and their awareness of and attitudes toward arborists' credentials.

Only one of the participants had worked with an arborist in the past. Many participants understood that arborists have more education than other tree care professionals, though only a few participants expressed that it is important to hire an arborist with credentials. A few participants said they only care that their arborist is knowledgeable about the particular tree they need help with.

> "I don't really know what arboriculture encompasses, so I can't really say whether it's important to me if they know about all of [tree care]...maybe I just care if they know about the tree I'm worried about."

How would you describe a "sustainable urban forest"?

Generally participants agreed that the urban forest is important. Two participants didn't understand or didn't feel qualified to describe "sustainable".

- Multiple participants said a sustainable urban forest has many types of tree species, so the trees don't all die from a pest/disease.
- Two participants described the wooded parts of a city, and one participant had difficulty combining the terms "urban" and "forest". Multiple participants said large mature trees are important, and one of these participants felt that access to large trees in the city is important for children and residents to be able to walk to, touch and enjoy.
- A few participants described trees growing healthily on their own, without active management.
- Other participants described collaboration and coexistence:
  > ..."can thrive and exist with the presence of the city population."
  > ..."can be maintained by residents and the city working together."
- A few participants agreed that buried power lines are important to remove the possibility of power loss from falling trees/limbs and to avoid more "ugly" and "butchered" trees.

Benefits of trees

- People most commonly valued trees (on their property and in their community) for shade and for aesthetic qualities.
  > "Aesthetics." "They're beautiful." "Scenery." "Aesthetic value." "Color."
  > "Shade. Protect my home." "It makes a major temperature difference."
- Multiple participants said trees provide clean air and oxygen, and habitat for wildlife. Other participants also mentioned windbreak, privacy, food, noise reduction, water retention and erosion prevention.

- One participant said trees reduce violence. In response, two participants said they thought that trees can increase crime by creating places to hide (one participant described how her home was robbed).
- A few participants agreed that houses with trees sell better, and trees increase property values.

Threats to trees

Participants commonly discussed pest and disease threats (emerald ash borer, Japanese beetles, gypsy moths, the loss of elm trees) and development threats (lack of protective policies or ordinances for trees, lack of green space around new downtown apartment buildings). Participants also mentioned storms and power line work threatening trees in Madison.

Other interesting comments

- Planting and removing trees: Participants discussed the high price to remove large or dying trees. One participant said paying to remove a mature tree seems more affordable if she planted it and enjoyed it throughout its life, compared with paying to remove an existing mature tree after moving into a house. Another participant said he is saving up money to plant an older tree, so that he can benefit from the tree's shade as soon as possible.
- Street trees and city management: Participants often commented about the city's actions regarding street trees in front of their properties, including: charging residents for sidewalk damage caused by street tree roots, not keeping up with street tree maintenance, charging residents for street tree replacement in front of their property, and not replacing a street tree after a tree removal:
  - *"Yeah, they charged us. But we didn't get any say on what tree went back in or anything. They just said, 'It's dead, you're right.' They pulled it out and they put something back in."*
  - *"It's just like our trees on the terrace are continually bucking up our sidewalk, and then the city wants to come through and charge us for a new sidewalk and my neighbor was complaining about that."*

A FEW UPDATES TO THE URBAN SURVEY...

Tree benefits: After hearing from participants about the many benefits they receive from trees, we expanded our list of tree benefits and concerns to better represent and assess urban resident attitudes toward trees.

Tree diversity: When we asked participants to describe tree diversity, we discovered they mainly thought about aesthetic differences. To learn more, we developed a new set of questions to explore residents' attitudes about tree diversity (aesthetic and ecological) in their city.

Madison Special Charge: Participants in the Madison focus groups were unaware of Madison's Special Charge, though there may be opportunities for outreach and education about its benefits. We developed 3 new questions to more broadly assess residents' support for urban tree programs: (1) *"I am willing to volunteer time to plant trees in my community,"* (2) *"I am willing to donate money to support tree planting projects in my community"*, and (3) *"I am willing to pay a tax or fee to support my local government's urban tree planting and care program."*

Urban wood use: In response to confusion about the phrase "higher value use" of urban wood, we developed 4 new questions with clearer language to explore residents' interest in urban wood utilization in Wisconsin. One question asks, *"How important, or not, is it to you that trees removed in your city are used as urban wood products?"*

III. SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESPONSES

Below is a summary of quantitative survey responses from the two residential property owner focus groups. Please note that with a small sample of only 13 respondents, this summary is not representative of the larger Madison population.

- The majority of the 13 respondents were single-family residential homeowners that owned their property jointly with a family member or spouse. Their average age was 57, there were 7 men and 6 women, the majority had an advanced degree and two were retired.

- Only one respondent owned more than one property in Madison, with 10 properties total.

- The most common property features were backyards and planted trees (Table 1).

- The most important reasons for owning their property were "Quality of the neighborhood" and "To enjoy beauty and scenery" (Table 2).

- Owners had an average of 8 trees on their property, with a range of 0 to 20 trees.

- The most common regularly occurring activities were "Mowing the lawn" and "Gardening" (Table 3).

- The most common activities to occur in the past 5 years AND likely to occur in the next five years were "Eliminating or removing invasive plants" and "Planting shrubs, flowers, and ornamental grasses." (Table 4 & Table 5).

- Only one person said an insurance company required them to remove a tree on their property.

- The most common person to perform the tree and yard work on their property was the owner (i.e. the person responding to the survey).

- Regularly occurring yard and tree expenditures were highest in the spring season, yet their highest expenditures were for one-time projects not tied to a season.

- The majority of respondents knew about half of their neighbors and rated their community's characteristics, such as cleanliness and quality of the parks, as "Very Good" or "Good" (Table 6).

- Respondents were only slightly familiar with programs that help them plant trees. In addition, they said they had not used these programs and were unlikely to use them in the future.

- When asked about their familiarity with professionals, respondents on average said they were relatively more familiar with tree care professionals and less familiar with urban foresters and extension agents.

- The majority of respondents prefer to receive information about their tree/grass/shrub care by talking to someone or using the internet and other social media (Table 7).

- On average, respondents agreed with statements that trees provide beneficial services and make neighborhoods better places to live. They disagreed with statements that trees are messy, unaffordable, and interfere with the enjoyment of their property (Table 8).

Selected Tables

Table 1: Property features. Percentages of respondents who said they have features on their property.

Property feature	% of respondents
Backyard	100%
Planted trees/shrubs	100%
Front yard	92%
Driveway	92%
Flower garden	85%
Patio, porch, or deck	85%
Vegetable/fruit garden	62%
Side yard	61%
Naturally grown trees/shrubs	53%
Shed or other storage building	46%
Recreational feature	7%
Water feature	0%

Table 2: Ownership reasons. Average scores of the reasons why respondents currently own their property. (1= Very Important, 5 = Not Important)

Ownership reason	Average importance
Quality of the neighborhood (e.g., peaceful, attractive, walkable)	1.77
To enjoy beauty or scenery	1.93
Safety of the area	2.00
Cost of the property	2.23
For property investment	2.25
To raise my family	2.27
Level of property tax	2.33
Services offered by my municipality	2.38
The local school system	2.45
Close to work/ convenience	2.50
For recreation	3.23
To pass property to my heirs	3.33

Table 3: Regularly occurring activities. Percentages of respondents who said an activity regularly occurs on their property.

Activity	% of respondents
Gardening	92%
Mowing the lawn	92%
Watching birds or other wildlife	85%
Social activities, such as cookouts or parties	77%
Watering lawn, trees, or other plants	69%
Composting yard and/or food waste	62%
Recreational activities, such as games, sports, or children playing	62%
None of these	7%

Table 4: Activities that occurred in the past 5 years. Percentages of respondents who said an activity occurred on their property in the past 5 years.

Activity	% of respondents
Eliminated or removed invasive plants	92%
Planted shrubs, flowers, or ornamental grasses	92%
Pruned trees	69%
Removed whole trees	54%
Used chemicals to control weeds or insects	54%
Applied fertilizers to lawn	46%
Collected or foraged wild plants or mushrooms on your property or from your neighborhood or nearby parks	46%
Planted trees	46%
Applied fertilizers to trees	23%
Installed a rain barrel	8%
Installed a new lawn	0%
None of these	0%

Table 5: Activities that will likely occur in the next 5 years. Percentages of respondents who said an activity will likely occur on their property in the next 5 years.

Activity	% of respondents
Eliminate or remove invasive plants	100%
Plant shrubs, flowers, or ornamental grasses	85%
Prune trees	69%
Plant trees	64%
Apply fertilizers to lawn	54%
Use chemicals to control weeds	54%
Remove whole trees	46%
Collect or forage wild plants or mushrooms on your property or from your neighborhood or nearby parks	39%
Apply fertilizers to trees	23%
Install a new lawn	7%
Install a rain barrel	0%
None of these	0%

Table 6: Community characteristics. Average ratings of community and neighborhood characteristics. (1 = Very Good, 5 = Very Poor)

Community characteristic	Average rating
Quality of parks and open spaces in my community	1.38
Cleanliness of streets and sidewalks in my neighborhood	1.46
Number of parks and open spaces in my community	1.54
Quality of the trees in my neighborhood	1.77
Number of trees in my neighborhood	1.77
Safety and security in my neighborhood	1.77
Air quality	1.92

Table 7: Preferred sources of information. Percentages of respondents who said how they prefer to receive information about the care of their trees/grass/shrubs.

Source of information	% of respondents
From the internet or other social media	92%
Talk to someone	85%
Read product labels	46%
Receive a brochure or written material	38%
Attend a workshop	23%
Lawn and garden center	20%
Local library	15%

Table 8: Perceptions/Attitudes about trees and green space. Average level of agreement with statements about trees and green space. (1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree)

Perception/Attitude statement	Average level of agreement
Trees provide services, like cooling my house in the summer or reducing air pollution	1.31
Having trees in a neighborhood makes it a better place to live	1.39
Good landscaping increases the value of my property	1.46
Having diverse trees in my community is important to me	1.46
I enjoy seeing wildlife on my property	1.69
The health and condition of trees in my community should be considered when new buildings are constructed or street improvements are made	1.78
I have the knowledge to properly care for the trees and shrubs on my property	2.08
I care about what my neighbors think of the appearance of my yard	2.54
The trees on my property are healthy and attractive	2.54
My community should invest more in tree plantings and tree care	2.62
Animals are a problem for my trees and/or garden	2.69
I have the skills to properly care for the trees and shrubs on my property	2.69
Trees on or near my property create more work for me	2.92
Planting and maintaining trees is unaffordable	3.23
Fallen branches, leaves, and seeds from trees make my property look messy	3.23
Trees interfere with the enjoyment of my property	4.23