Community Leaders' Perceptions of Urban Forests in Hillsborough County, Florida

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Community involvement in the effort to protect and manage city trees is important to ensure that the urban forest continues to thrive and to contribute to the well-being of the public. Research shows that trees can provide a wide range of ecosystem services such as improving air and water quality, reducing energy use costs and improving the urban climate. Urban forests can even increase property values and attract shoppers. Understanding the public's beliefs and attitudes toward trees will assist county managers, planners, extension agents, arborists, and foresters in working with the community to promote urban forests. In this fact sheet, we will compare the results from a needs assessment in Hillsborough County to a national urban tree survey and share some initial insights into community perceptions and beliefs regarding urban trees in one county along Florida's Gulf Coast.

Results from a stakeholder analysis and two nominal group meetings with urban and suburban Hillsborough County residents concerning their perceptions of urban forests were used to design a countywide survey that was mailed to 641 homeowner association (HOA) leaders across Hillsborough County in the summer of 2007 (Northrop and others 2007). The mailing list was provided by the Hillsborough County Community Relations Office. The HOA leaders were asked a series of questions concerning their perceptions and attitudes about the benefits as well as concerns for having urban forests in their communities. An urban forest was defined as the trees along streets and in yards, woodlands, forests and natural areas found in and around places such as neighborhoods, cities and towns.

The 24% of HOA leaders responding to the survey listed the top benefits of urban forests recorded in Table 1. A recent national survey of urban residents by researchers from Washington State University asked 2,004 homeowners about their attitudes concerning urban trees (Lohr and others 2004). Table 1 compares the responses from both surveys.

The outcome of the Hillsborough County survey suggests that HOA leaders perceive the same costs of trees in cities as urban residents nationally (Lohr and others 2004), except that Hillsborough County HOA Archival copy: for current recommendations see http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu or your local extension office.
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When Hillsborough County survey respondents were asked, "What were your sources for tree care information?" they responded:

1. Newsletters
2. Newspapers and magazines
3. The Internet
4. Landscaping specialists
5. Friends

This additional result can be used to determine venues for providing information to homeowners on proper care and maintenance of urban forests.

Although limited, this survey could indicate that Hillsborough County Florida HOA leaders' reasons for having trees in urban areas are similar to those of citizens elsewhere in the United States. However, Hillsborough County respondents indicated a greater concern for hurricane damage to and from trees. Differing beliefs and attitudes toward trees frequently give rise to challenges in managing and dealing with urban forests. These preliminary results are in line with many recent experiences by people working in urban forests in Florida. The results highlight the need to educate people on proper species selection, site design, plant quality, and the benefits as well as costs of urban trees. This information could be used to provide local governments with information on HOA and possibly community leaders' perceptions about urban forests.

### Literature Cited

