

Testimony regarding elimination of the Community Investment Act.

February 19, 2016

To the Finance, Environment Committee
Senator Ted Kennedy, Jr.
Representative James Albis

The Power of Trees: Some Historical Perspective

There is a deep irony that the state agency, the State Park and Forest Commission celebrated its centennial in 2013 just as United Illuminating initiated its vegetation plan to trim and remove roadside trees. History does not always provide the solution, but it can help prevent us from forgetting how such a response, forgive me, “fails to see the forest through the trees.” Electrification and the practice of forestry evolved side-by-side as industries and material benefits to our quality of life in both rural and urban setting. A century ago, efforts to rebuild the denuded forests of Connecticut and the urban tree movement went hand in hand. American forestry as a science and policy was born here. Simsbury native Gifford Pinchot, the first Director of the National Forest Service, founded the first American Forestry School at Yale. Growing out the same conservation movement, the Connecticut Forestry Association advocated trees as both forests and in urban areas to enhance the quality of life challenged by urbanization and industrialization (both fueled by advanced in electrical transmission and distribution).

As a historian, I have worked for a power company in the American West. I literally wrote a book on electrical distribution in that region. It addressed ways that landscape challenges the delivery of power and sometimes prohibits it physically or economically. Sustainable and feasible power distribution systems work best when they respond to local conditions and socioeconomic needs. The same could be said about tree management. In Connecticut, trees are historically as much a part of the roadside infrastructure as power lines.

In 1926, the CFA and Yale School of Forestry released guidelines advocating the planting of shade trees along roadways. Considering all the ecological arguments about drainage, pollution control, traffic calming, and energy conservation we cite today, but economic, aesthetic, and esoteric ones: that trees offered a sense of place, appeal to tourists, and increased property values. The pamphlet warned, however, that such action required planning for planting, care and improvement of existing trees, and regulating wire lines. All this would also necessitate the cooperation of forester, landscape architect, community planner, and engineer.ⁱ

Most interestingly in light of UI’s current policy, the guidelines advocated these solutions over pruning, which “often causes great damage to the appearance of our roadways. Under careful and intelligent supervision, it can be reduced to a minimum.” Even back then a central problem with tree management was the uncoordinated policies and poor training of public officials that “even with the best will in the world on

the part of all concerned, little can be accomplished.” The primary recommendation was a state roadside landscape commission.

Forests were supposed to contribute to Connecticut’s economic development. And although the scientific foresters, often credited with crafting a vision of conservation and national forest policy, built an administrative structure in the SFPC reflecting that, they ultimately failed to create a sustainable management system that regarded urban trees as cultural as well as natural resources. After World War II, a focus on the automobile and widening streets undermined the proper management of the urban forest.

Without oversight, trees, some the wrong ones planted in the wrong place have “gone wild” along our roadways, threatening the power lines, our “right” to electricity that industrialism brought. Today, our state searches for a post-industrial economy, one that emphasizes density in development, walkability, and transit-oriented development. Without this bill to manage tree maintenance, we undermine the “placemaking” initiatives of our own Department of Economic and Community Development that aims to define Connecticut as an attractive to live, work, and visit.

A century ago, amidst rapid industrialization, your progressive-era your predecessors purposefully committed to defining Connecticut as a place for trees as both environmental and cultural resources. Clearly, Irene, the 2011 October storm, and Sandy were game changers. But we should be careful about throwing the proverbial baby with the bathwater and undermining our own goals for revitalizing our state due to lack of coordinated planning between our urban forest and the power systems.

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ⁱ Connecticut Forestry Association, “Roadside Shade Trees: A Manual of Roadside Improvement for Tree Wardens and Others Interested,” (New Haven, CT: The Connecticut State Park and Forest Commission), January 1928.