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City wants to plant trees with borrowed money

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WORCESTER — In an unprecedented move, the city wants to borrow money for planting new trees.

The City Council Tuesday night authorized the city to file a home-rule petition with the Legislature, seeking permission to borrow money for a tree replacement program citywide to make up for the thousands of trees that have been lost from public ways because of the Asian longhorned beetle infestation and damage from the Dec. 11-12 ice storm.

City Manager Michael V. O'Brien said the legislation, if approved, would allow the city to proceed with borrowing to support a \$500,000 public shade tree investment plan for this fiscal year.

He said the city needs the special legislation because state law looks at the planting of trees as an "incidental" expense that is not eligible for funding from the city's capital budget.

The manager said the bonds or notes issued for the tree replacement program would be for a term not to exceed 15 years.

The money is intended to supplement the efforts of the nonprofit Worcester Tree Initiative, which was launched in January by Lt. Gov. Timothy P. Murray and U.S. Rep. James P. McGovern, D-Worcester. Each has donated \$5,000 from his campaign fund. Wal-Mart Foundation and CSX Transportation, meanwhile, have committed nearly \$200,000.

The initiative's goal is to plant 30,000 trees over the next five years.

The special legislation the city manager recommended to the council was in response to an order filed earlier this year by District 1 Councilor Joffrey A. Smith, who thinks the city has an obligation to come up with some money for the tree-replacement program.

He said the replacement trees will go a long way toward restoring the quality of life in the Greendale/Burncoat neighborhoods, which have been hit hard by the beetle infestation. About 22,000 trees have been cut down in Worcester and nearby towns since the first beetles were found in the Greendale neighborhood last year.

"It will make a huge difference to be able to replace so many of the city street trees that we have lost because of the Asian longhorned beetle and because of the ice storm," Mr. Smith said. "The residents in that part of the city have had to suffer a lot, and restoring their quality of life is so vital. Even though this is a first step toward replacing these trees, it's by no means the end. But at least it's the start of something good."

In a related matter, a council candidate contends the state is doing a "substandard" job in repairing sidewalks that have been damaged by the removal of trees in the upper Burncoat Street area.

Joseph A. Casello, who is a candidate for the District 1 council seat, said the sidewalk repair is being done by the state Department of Conservation and Recreation, which oversees the tree-cutting program, without any oversight by the city.

In many instances, he said, the damaged sidewalks have been filled in with asphalt patches that are uneven and inadequate.

In a petition he filed with the council Tuesday night, Mr. Casello asked the city to coordinate the repairs to sidewalks in those areas.

"It amazes me that this work is being done by the (state), with no city oversight for quality control," Mr. Casello said. "These are our (city's) sidewalks and the city should have oversight to make sure the work is being done right. The work being performed is substandard and will cost the taxpayers even more in the long run."

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