

MARBLEHEAD REPORTER

Sustainable Marblehead lobbies for Tree Department funding from federal ARPA money

The organization asked to use ARPA funds to expand the role of the Tree Warden

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While the town continues to work on an ARPA spending plan, one organization has made a bid for some of the money to go toward trees.

Sustainable Marblehead's Town Trees and Urban Forestry branch has asked the Board of Selectmen to allocate a portion of the COVID-19 relief funding to expand the Tree Department.

The American Rescue Plan will deliver \$350 billion for eligible communities across the country to cover the cost burden of COVID-19. Town Administrator Jason Silva said the town has \$3 million of ARPA funding in hand and will be receiving \$3 million more in 2022.

Palma Bickford said the request to use some of that money for the Tree Department is threefold:

1. It will enhance the visual appeal of the town and draw more tourists
2. It would allow them to create a comprehensive Urban Forestry Management Plan that would increase public safety and utility resilience
3. It would enhance environmental protections through green infrastructure that would support changing needs due to climate change.

Tree story

Bickford said starting in the late 1800s trees were planted in towns for beauty, shade, windbreaks and privacy. Initially, streets were lined with single species like Elm, Chestnut,

Laurel, Birch, hence the names of such streets, but that changed after Dutch Elm Disease and other plagues wiped many of them out.

In the 1970s plantings became much more haphazard with the use of non-native and poorly chosen trees, trees that flowered or had shallow roots.

“They were also planted without regard to their life cycle requirements, urban conditions, and size,” Bickford said.

That led to trees being planted in areas where now they crowd utility lines. And many planted within a few years of each other are collectively reaching the end of their urban lives.

“As a result, many neighborhoods are stripped of trees and in others, the weakened limbs and roots are becoming a serious threat during the increased storm events we've been experiencing,” she explained. “This places additional economic and safety burden on the Electric, DPW, Fire, Police and other town departments called in to address emergency situations.”

The dilemma, Bickford pointed out is whether or not to cut all the offending trees down, which would result in heat islands and barren neighborhoods with no relief from the hot sun or protection from wind, rain or traffic fumes, and noise.

More than just a pretty face

Also, from an environmental perspective, trees are more than just a pretty face on the landscape Bickford said.

“They quantitatively add to environmental and physical health for the land, the inhabitants, and the sea by cleaning air, dampening winds, and capturing water,” she said.

So the answer is, in Sustainable Marblehead’s opinion, to create and implement a comprehensive assessment and plan for reforestation that addresses visual appeal as well as environmental impact and safety, something Marblehead currently doesn’t have.

Bickford said despite the fact that the town’s Tree Warden is creative, talented and educated, he only works 20 hours per week and couldn’t possibly address such a project under that limitation.

“We need ARPA funding to create more staffing hours, initiate and complete the assessments, and develop a multi-year management plan,” she said. “We also need more

investment and access to human expertise and mechanical resources so that we can choose the right plants for the right location and planted in the right soil conditions. Grants will be important for the ongoing work, but ARPA funds should be allocated to make an immediate impact.”

Bickford said she thought the Marblehead Light Board, Water and Sewer, DPW, and the Health Departments should also be directly funding the Tree Department's planning and maintenance requirements “as their infrastructures are directly impacted by the quality of the urban forest health and welfare.”

“In summary, the goals for Urban Forestry cannot be focused on just beautifying the town with an unsophisticated general planting of pretty trees that get in the way of pedestrians, bicyclists, and snowplows,” read her prepared report. “We must change our investment mindset to address environmental needs.

The response

Selectman Erin Noonan said she thought the request would fit the ARPA requirements and was the kind of substantive project the town was looking for.

“I think it’s an interesting idea, it’s different and something we should consider,” she said.

Selectman Alexa Singer appreciated that it wasn’t just about replacing trees but replacing them in a way that would better benefit the town.

Selectman Jim Nye wondered how it was different than what the Tree Department was currently doing.

Noonan said she simply felt the request had a lot of support and the board should take a vote to support it as well. Belf-Becker said she didn’t believe 32 names under the written request constituted widespread support.

Noonan reiterated that based on the town’s goals in regards to climate change, it wasn’t a stretch to say there would be support for the initiative. Belf-Becker reiterated that the issue was for the ARPA working group to decide. Noonan said she simply wanted the board to vote to clarify they were in support, not to tell the group what to do.

“Thank you for saying that but it doesn’t change my mind,” Belf-Becker said.