



Jim Lytle

Mississippi Cities and Towns Turning Greener

By Karen Brasher

A recent survey conducted by Mississippi State University shows Mississippi civic leaders support establishment of urban and community forestry projects to enhance their communities.

Urban forestry focuses on the management of trees and forests in urban settings to foster social, environmental and economic benefits.

Scientists in the Forest and Wildlife Research Center conducted the survey of city and town government leaders and other community planners to identify community needs and issues relative to urban forestry.

"About one-third of the 159 respondents had initiated an urban and community forestry program prior to the survey," said lead investigator and forestry professor Steve Grado. "However, the fact that the majority—73.6 percent—realized the need for such projects is good news for Mississippi's cities and towns."

Trees provide benefits that include air quality improvement, annual carbon dioxide reduction, increased annual net energy savings, storm water runoff reduction, floodwater storage, erosion prevention, increased property values, noise reduction, aesthetics, and wildlife benefits, among others, Grado added.

The survey found that funding was the most important factor in addressing urban and community forestry program needs, but most respondents had little awareness of funding sources for adopting their forestry plans.

"It's clear we need to do a better job of communicating funding opportunities to city governments," Grado said. "Our

survey results also indicated a need for technical expertise in addressing tree care and implementation of community forestry programs."

To assist municipalities in managing urban forests, the Mississippi Forestry Commission, in collaboration with MSU's Forest and Wildlife Research Center and the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality, developed a *Mississippi Urban and Community Forestry Management Manual* and companion compact disc.

"The manual addresses issues and provides management guidance about urban and community forests," explained Walter Passmore, urban forestry partnership coordinator for the Mississippi Forestry Commission.

The guide's comprehensive information is one tool for civic and community leaders, municipal officials and citizens interested in community forestry needs, Passmore added.

Establishing urban and community forests often can generate immediate economic benefits and outweigh the initial costs, the experts said. Based on an analysis by the MSU Forest and Wildlife Research Center of fiscal year 2003-04, publicly maintained street trees produced nearly \$1.25 million in tangible benefits for Hattiesburg, primarily through energy savings and improved air quality.

"The return on investment can be significant," Grado noted. "In Hattiesburg, benefits amounted to an average of \$111.24 per publicly maintained tree or approximately \$22.73 for every resident. The city's street trees returned \$4.10 to the community for every \$1 spent on their management."