

## **KUB Improves Vegetation Management Program With Input From a Citizen Review Panel**

Knoxville Utilities Board (KUB), a municipal utility in Knoxville, Tennessee, provides electric, natural gas, water, and wastewater services to about 440,000 customers (more than 197,000 are electric customers). KUB received its Tree Line USA designation in 2001, and the City of Knoxville received its Tree City USA designation in 1992.

KUB named a Tree Trim Policy Review Panel in January 2010 to help address community concerns about tree pruning and is already implementing panel recommendations. KUB suggested the panel to the Knoxville City Council in late 2009, following concerns citizens expressed to the council. The council included KUB's panel suggestion in a resolution it passed December 1, 2009.

"Most customers understand that tree pruning is necessary to ensure safe, reliable electric service," said Liz Hannah, KUB's lead forester, "but there will always be customers who have issues about their individual trees or who don't understand proper pruning methods. That's an issue for all electric utilities, and it's one that KUB has addressed in recent years by increasing its Vegetation Management (VM) staff, focusing on communication, and continuously improving the program through public input. The panel was another way to gather input and identify improvements."

KUB sought nominations for the panel from the community through news releases and information on its website at [www.kub.org](http://www.kub.org). On January 21, KUB named a 15-member panel chosen from over 75 applicants. The panelists included citizens who had been critical of KUB and its tree trimming policies, tree experts, environmentalists, and representatives from KUB and the City of Knoxville.

"We wanted the panel to represent all our ratepayers," Hannah said, "so we selected members from throughout our service area with many professions and interests. We felt that diversity was important to ensure the panel would have credibility and would be able to give us input from different points of view."

Bill Elmore, KUB Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer, served as an ex-officio non-voting member of the panel. KUB also provided support staff at the meetings to help answer questions and to gather information for updates to the public. That included Hannah, other VM staff, and members of KUB's Communications Department.

### **Panel Meetings Were Open to Public**

The panel and a third-party facilitator provided by KUB began work February 5, 2010, with a half-day organizational meeting. The panel set its own meeting schedule, including the first public forum, which was held February 16. All panel meetings were open to the public and there were

opportunities for public input at evening meetings, so that as many people as possible had a chance to participate.

KUB also posted a full list of panel members, meeting schedules and agendas, and information that included pruning guidelines, VM forms, etc., on its Web site at [www.kub.org](http://www.kub.org). KUB encouraged customers who could not attend the meetings to submit questions, comments, or suggestions to the panel by mail, phone, or e-mail.

Hannah provided an overview of KUB policies to the panel at its first meeting. That presentation, along with one from Tom Simpson, East Tennessee Regional Urban Forester, introduced panelists to the lateral pruning method and how it helps protect tree health.

“One thing that the panel gleaned from the presentations and wanted us to concentrate on communicating more effectively,” Hannah said, “was the apparent disconnect between the tree’s appearance after lateral pruning, which customers might find “ugly,” and the tree’s health. They wanted us to reinforce that such an “ugly” tree is actually healthier than a “pretty” tree that has been rounded over.”

The panel met 21 times, for a total of 83 hours, in seven months. All meetings were advertised, open to the public, and included a public comment period.

Nearly 40 citizens attended the meetings, and 14 people spoke during the public comment segment. The panel also received 144 e-mails, calls, and letters, from 106 citizens.

In addition to public input, the panel heard from a variety of speakers and toured sites of recent pruning. Speakers included KUB staff (who spoke about the existing program), panel members, and outside experts in urban forestry, arboriculture, property law, and other related areas.

### **Panel Report Included 75 Recommendations**

The panel presented its final report and recommendations to the KUB Board on September 16. The panel supported KUB’s continued use of the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) A300 pruning standard, but made recommendations for improvements in several areas. The report included 75 recommendations with 150-plus action items in areas including Aesthetics, Implementation, and Preventive Actions; Communication With Customers, Contracts and Contractors, and Dispute Resolution.

KUB staff reviewed the report and developed KUB’s Response to Tree Trim Policy Review Panel Recommendations. Before presenting the response to the KUB Board, staff held four more community meetings and used the Web to gather more public input.

*(The panel's report and KUB's response are available online: from [www.kub.org](http://www.kub.org), look under the Hot Topics Index for KUB Response to Tree Trim Policy Review Panel Recommendations.)*

### **KUB Board Approved Implementing All But Four Recommendations**

“After we received the panel’s report, we reviewed and evaluated all the recommendations to see how they might be integrated into our Vegetation Management Program,” Hannah said. “We presented our findings to our Board of Commissioners, which approved implementing the panel’s community vision, its proposed objectives, and all but four recommendations.”

The four recommendations not approved were 100 percent pre-planning (i.e., having foresters go door-to-door to plan work and notify customers in advance of the tree crews' work), bringing the pre-planning function in-house, removing all wood after tree removal, and grinding stumps after tree removal. [Note: KUB already removes wood from tree pruning.] After evaluating all recommendations, KUB decided against those four due to their associated costs and potential impact on ratepayers. Implementing the four recommendations would increase program costs by \$2.3 to \$3 million a year.

What are some of the major recommendations KUB has begun to implement?

- Naming a Vegetation Management Customer Advocate (VMCA) to own resolution of disputes not resolved in the field.
- Reducing clearances around some distribution system components, such as down guy wires, neutral lines, and street light wires.
- Evaluating/redesigning print materials, including a new comprehensive VM guide, and reviewing materials with a focus group to ensure they are easy to understand.
- Implementing a robo call system as another notification tool.
- Forming an internal VM Oversight Committee and a VM Process Improvement Team.

### **KUB Implementing Recommendations in Phases**

“With 75 recommendations including 150-plus action items, there was no way KUB could do everything at once,” Hannah said. “We developed categories of things we could do immediately and short- and long-term implementation projects.”

Some of the things KUB did immediately included enhancing its online map of planned pruning and providing larger replacement trees. The map originally showed major streets to give customers an idea of where pruning crews would be working. The panel suggested showing more streets and neighborhoods and giving specific dates of when crews would be in those areas.

Some of the longer-term recommendations needed research into the feasibility of implementation. For example, the panel recommended that KUB conduct a feasibility study on tree growth regulators. KUB agreed to begin a study in the spring of 2012. KUB will evaluate the results of the study over three to four years of growth before making a final determination.

Even with the phased implementation, KUB began immediately working on longer-range projects to ensure it can implement them on time. For example, KUB began working with a public relations professional immediately after it adopted the panel's recommendations to set up a focus group to evaluate communication materials. "The panel report stresses the importance of communicating with customers and of making materials clear, concise, appealing, and easy to understand," Hannah said. "We will work to produce a comprehensive guide to our VM program that will be given to customers in the field when they have questions. It will also be available on our Web site this summer. In addition to the guide, current customer notification materials, including letters and doorhangers, will be reviewed by a focus group. KUB also communicates with its customers via homeowner's association presentations, its Web site, bill inserts, bill messages, etc."

**Box:**

**KUB Vegetation Management by the Numbers**

197,000 KUB electric customers

686 square miles of electric service area

5,200 miles of lines [4,300 miles overhead]

170,400 poles

1,200 miles pruned annually

3 KUB foresters [with plans to add 2 more] and 9 contract foresters

30 to 40 contract crews working year round