



For Immediate Release: 02.27.08

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Annual battle with Dutch elm disease about to begin

Village, residents to share cost of removing diseased trees on private property

As the Village ramps up its annual battle against Dutch elm disease, residents are reminded that infected trees on private property must be removed within 30 days of notification by the Forestry Division. The Village will pay half the cost of removing a diseased tree on private property, a budget-driven change from the past few years when the Village paid the entire cost of removal.

Village foresters soon will begin cruising streets and alleys to identify trees for signs of the deadly DED fungus that has destroyed the majority of elm trees in the northern United States. Once a tree is infected, the only known remedy is to remove the diseased tree, hopefully before it has infected other trees in the area.

Property owners may choose their own contractor to remove a diseased tree or use a contractor selected by the Village through a competitive bid. If a Village contractor is used, the property owner will be billed for half the cost after the tree has been removed. Payment to the Village must be made within 30 days of the invoice.

If a property owner uses a private contractor, the firm must be licensed by the Village and the contract approved by the Village before the tree is removed to claim the Village subsidy. However, if the bid of a contractor chosen by the property owner is higher than that of the Village contractor, the property owner must pay the difference.

According to Oak Park's chief forester, Jim Semelka, the Village's inventory of Dutch elm trees has dwindled to about 2,300 from the more than 16,000 elms that dominated Oak Park parkways in the 1950s. The remaining elm trees are among the Village's largest, he said, averaging between 25 inches and 35 inches in diameter.

Semelka urged anyone who suspects a tree is infected to call the Village for an inspection. If infected, the tree will be tagged and a DED information notice placed on the property owner's front door. Diseased elms must be removed within 30 days of the notification.

"To combat the continued impact of Dutch elm disease on our community, and minimize further loss of our elm trees, we need everyone's cooperation," Semelka said. "Only by working together, can we preserve this important resource."

Last year, more than 300 diseased elms were removed from parkways and private property. Cost to remove a tree depends on its size, location and accessibility.

For more information on Dutch elm disease or other forestry issues, call 708.358.5700 or e-mail publicworks@oak-park.us.

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