When a storm dropped wet, heavy snow late one spring on the city of Waukesha, Wisconsin, the damage to trees was devastating. The city forester went to the finance committee for emergency funding to conduct restoration pruning on damaged trees that survived. He reports that the response to his request was, “We are a Tree City USA; we are proud of the designation, and we intend to keep it.” The vote was unanimous in favor of the forester’s request.

To qualify for Tree City USA status, a town or city must meet four standards established by the Arbor Day Foundation and the National Association of State Foresters. These standards were established to ensure that every qualifying community would have a viable tree management plan and program. Importantly, they were also designed so that no community would be excluded because of size. Two of the four standards are listed below.

A TREE BOARD OR DEPARTMENT
Someone must be legally responsible for the care and management of the community’s trees. This may be a professional forester or arborist, an entire forestry department, or a volunteer tree board. Often, both a professional staff and advisory tree board are present, which is a good goal for most communities.

A tree board, or commission, is a group of concerned volunteer citizens charged by ordinance with developing and administering a comprehensive tree-management program. Balanced, broad-based community involvement is encouraged. Boards function best if not composed entirely of tree-related professionals such as forestry professors, nursery operators, arborists, etc. Fresh ideas and different perspectives are added by citizens with an interest in trees that is entirely avocational. Limited, staggered terms of service will prevent stagnation or burnout, while at the same time ensuring continuity.

A COMMUNITY TREE ORDINANCE
The tree ordinance must designate the establishment of a tree board or forestry department and give this body the responsibility for writing and implementing an annual community forestry work plan. Beyond that, the ordinance should be flexible enough to fit the needs and circumstances of the particular community.

A tree ordinance provides an opportunity to set good policy and back it with the force of law when necessary. Ideally, it will provide clear guidance for planting, maintaining, and removing trees from streets, parks, and other public places.

For tips and a checklist of important items to consider in writing or improving a tree ordinance, see Tree City USA Bulletin No. 9.