

Penn Hills designated a Tree City USA

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Photo courtesy of Penn Hills Shade Tree Commission

Kathy Raborn, in blue, gives a tree planting demonstration ahead of a group planting project at Penn Hills Community Park in September 2019.

By 4:02 PM, Dillon Carr

Penn Hills has been designated as a Tree City USA by the Arbor Foundation, according to the municipality's shade tree commission.

Penn Hills shares the designation with Forest Hills, Mt. Lebanon, Swissvale and Wilkinsburg.

The municipality is in line to receive a flag, two road signs and a plaque, which were scheduled to be awarded during the Penn Hills Shade Tree Commission's Arbor Day Celebration scheduled for May 2.

"But it got canceled because of the coronavirus," said Kathy Raborn, the commission's director, referring to the May 2 event. Arbor Day this year falls on April 24.

To be considered, a community must have a shade tree commission or related board; a tree care ordinance; a forestry program with an annual budget of at least \$2 per capita and an Arbor Day celebration or proclamation, according to the Arbor Day Foundation.

"I have long been proud that the municipality of Penn Hills has a shade tree commission. Not every community has one," said Mayor Pauline Calabrese in a written statement.

The commission was founded in June 2017.

"But I am even more proud that the hard work of Kathy Raborn and all of those on the commission is finally getting the well-deserved recognition. This speaks volumes about their work and it reflects on the beauty of the tree-lined streets of our hometown," Calabrese said.

Last year was the first year the newly-formed commission reached those benchmarks, said Raborn, who said reaching the designation has been a personal goal she's held for years.

"It has been goal of mine of over 20 years," she said. "It's just something I often dreamed about, thought about, and wondered if I could do that someday."

The hardest requirement to reach, she said, was spending \$80,000 on its programming. That number is based on spending \$2 for each of Penn Hills' 40,000 residents. The shade tree commission started with \$100 in 2017, Raborn said. Since then, the commission, a nonprofit, has raised money through an annual fundraiser and received various grants.

A commission's budget can include municipal expenses that relate to trees, such as purchasing or renting equipment for landscaping on municipal property, tree trimming services, leaf pick-up and insect control.

Since its start, the commission has organized volunteer events where 136 trees have been planted in neighborhoods and parks. The largest number of trees planted occurred in 2019, when the commission planted 72 between its Plum Creek Riparian Project and Front Yard Tree Project.

Raborn said the Plum Creek Riparian Project is the commission's largest project, which includes a 5-year plan to uproot the invasive Japanese knotweed plants that have overgrown the banks of the creek. The commission plans to remove the weeds and replant trees and shrubs in their place.

The Front Yard Tree Project involves planting trees along the streets. The commission has done such events along Allegheny River Boulevard and Veronica, MacFarlane and Springdale drives.

The designation is awarded annually. Each community's tree board or commission must apply yearly.

So Raborn is not hopeful the shade tree commission will be able to reach the designation again next year, since many events have been canceled or postponed and municipal budgets are strained.

"We'll put an application in each year and see what happens. But we expect not to make it for next year," Raborn said.

The Arbor Foundation partners with the U.S. Forest Service and the National Association of State Foresters to sponsor the Tree City USA recognition program. According to its website, the foundation has recognized around 3,400 communities nationwide since starting the initiative in 1976.

Raborn said the commission's Arbor Day Celebration will not be rescheduled this year, but it will sponsor additional events later this year. For more information, visit the Penn Hills Shade Tree Commission website.

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