

# **CITY OF SAVANNAH**

## **TREE LAWN COMPLIANCE AND POLICY GUIDE**



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## **I. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE:**

Much of Savannah's beauty and unique character comes from a tradition of City tree plantings on landscaped areas found along its sidewalks, squares, parks, medians and neighborhood tree lawns. The Landscape and Tree Protection Ordinance within the City of Savannah Code of Ordinances (Specifically Section 8-11008 Design requirements) mandate the specific requirement to establish or restore a tree lawn when new, redeveloped, or improved non-residential and multi-family construction occurs.

It is assumed that some property owners will voluntarily create a tree lawn or tree well in order to improve the appearance of their adjacent property. For that reason the Park and Tree Department created this **Tree Lawn Compliance and Policy Guide (Guide)** to assist property owners seeking to develop, build or renovate a tree lawn. Specifications and requirements which must be followed are provided here. This Guide also provides the owner of property adjacent to a tree lawn with direction for the design, landscaping, and maintenance of tree lawns and tree wells.

### **The purpose of this Guide is to:**

- 1.** Ensure appropriate and consistent development and re-development of tree lawns within the City of Savannah.
- 2.** Provide guidelines for design to ensure appropriate scale, function and character of all new and redeveloped tree lawns.
- 3.** Provide enforceable policies and guidance for the landscaping, maintenance, and design of tree lawns as well as remedies for non-compliance.
- 4.** Assist applicants with navigation through the approval process.

## **II. HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:**

This manual is intended to assist the property owner in planning and designing a tree lawn. It summarizes the City's requirements for design, the approval process, and policies for landscaping and ongoing maintenance. Design requirements addresses the use of different construction and plant materials based on available area, scale of streets and open spaces, consistency with adjacent tree lawns and/or streetscape themes, historical/architectural appropriateness, and maintenance considerations. Specific guidelines are found in Section IV. The various City departments will follow these guidelines during the approval process and in any subsequent compliance evaluation and review.

Before a tree lawn or tree well is constructed property owners are required to secure a City of Savannah Right of Way Permit from the Traffic Engineering Department (see Section III. 6).

## **III. TECHNICAL TERMS AND DEFINITIONS:**

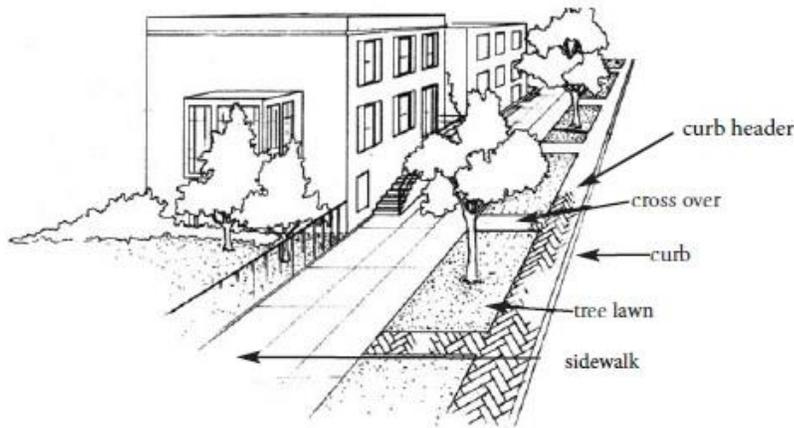
For the purposes of this Guide, the following list provides commonly understood technical terms and definitions typically utilized in the design and regulatory areas within city departments, listed in alphabetical order. They apply to the requirements and instructions of this section.

- 1. ADA-Compliant Sidewalk.** Hard-surface, pedestrian walkway area between the farthest extent of stoops extending perpendicular to the building façade and the back of the curb. ADA-compliant sidewalks must be a minimum four feet in width, with a five-foot by five-foot passing area a maximum of every 200 feet, with 80 inches of clear height overhead from tree branches, unobstructed by building and hardscape features, or as approved by the City Traffic Engineer, when strict compliance is impossible within the historic context.
- 2. Caliper.** The diameter or thickness of a young tree measured at six inches above ground level. Used for nursery stock having a diameter of four inches or less.

3. **City of Savannah Park and Tree Department.** Approves or denies proposed tree lawn plantings of trees and shrubs based on consistency, function, scale, ease of maintenance, pedestrian and vehicular safety. The Park and Tree Department administers the Landscape and Tree Preservation Ordinance, and manages the urban forest of the City of Savannah.
4. **City of Savannah Right of Way Permit.** A permit granted by the City of Savannah Traffic Engineering Department to allow citizens and private entities to construct connections for access and utility services, as well as aesthetic improvements including tree lawns and tree wells, within the rights-of-way.
5. **City of Savannah Traffic Engineering Department.** Approves or denies proposed sidewalk and tree lawn construction based on design criteria found in the provisions of the Public Right of Way Accessibility Guidelines (PROWAG) for ADA compliance in Rights of Way, City of Savannah Complete Streets Ordinance, GDOT Complete Streets Policy in GDOT Design Policy Manual and, the Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE) Urban Street Design Guide and AASHTO “Green Book” guidelines. The Department is responsible for installing street lights, traffic signals and street signage in the tree lawn.
6. **Critical Root Zone.** The minimum area surrounding a tree that is considered essential to the structural support and viability of the tree. The City’s Landscape and Tree Protection Ordinance defines this as an area contained within a radius of one foot per inch of trunk diameter at 4.5 feet above the ground level at the base (DBH).
7. **Cross-Overs.** Pervious, hard surface path connecting the back of curb and the sidewalk installed by the adjacent property owner through a tree lawn to avoid damaging trees and landscaping while accessing parked cars in front of their property.

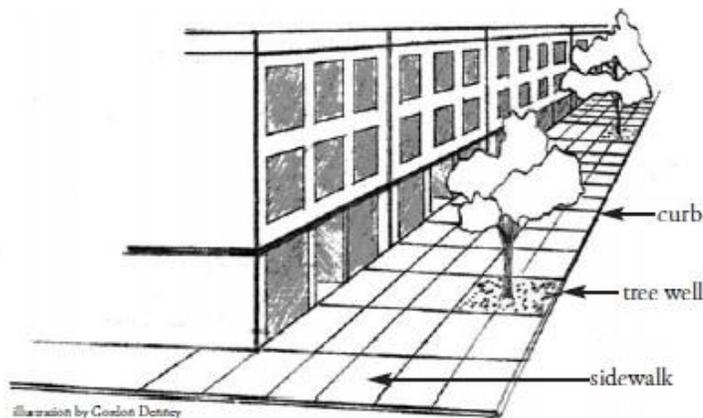
8. **Curb Header.** A strip of bricks or pavers laid inside the tree lawn against the back of curb to facilitate egress from or ingress to a parked vehicle without having to step into the landscaped area.
9. **Diameter at Breast Height (DBH).** The diameter of the main stem of a tree measured at 4.5 feet above natural grade at its base.
10. **Encroachment Petition.** A process used to consider requests from citizens or private entities for the allowance of any item or structure to encroach into City-owned real property (i.e., rights of way, tree lawn, sidewalk, streets) whether above, below or on the earth's surface. The review process is intended to ensure the health and safety of the public as well as protect against potential damage to the streetscape, trees and vegetation, sidewalks, streets, and other publicly-owned amenities. Encroachment petitions can take 8-10 weeks (see Section VI.3.A. herein).
11. **Hardscape.** Permanent fixtures within the landscape including walls, benches, planters, bollards, tethers, street lighting and landscape lighting, trash receptacles, curbing and paving.
12. **Landscape Architect.** A state-registered professional qualified to determine appropriateness of proposed tree and shrub plantings in tree lawns based on their proposed context within the environment. The City's Landscape Architect is the administrator of the Landscape and Tree Preservation Ordinance.
13. **Large Canopy Tree.** Tree species with a mature height greater than 40 feet, and a minimum of 30 foot diameter canopy as listed on the Park and Tree Department's preferred species lists. Examples include Live Oak, Southern Magnolia and deciduous oaks.
14. **Medium Canopy Tree.** Tree species with a mature height between 25 feet and 40 feet as listed on the Park and Tree Department's preferred species lists. Examples include Trident Maple, Chinese Elm, and American Holly.

15. **Pervious Paving.** A hard surface provided for pedestrian traffic that allows water to percolate into the soil. Types of pervious paving include bricks, concrete pavers and porous concrete.
16. **Rights-of-Way.** The area of land exclusive of private property that belongs to the City of Savannah in order to provide access to private property by pedestrians, vehicles and utilities.
17. **Small Canopy Tree.** Tree species with a mature height up to 25 feet as listed on the Park and Tree Department's preferred species lists. Examples include Flowering Dogwood, Eastern Redbud, Crepe Myrtle, and East Palatka Holly.
18. **Street Tree.** A canopy shade tree or ornamental tree adapted to thrive in urban conditions and mostly lacking in negative qualities such as being particularly susceptible to wind damage or prone to the excessive dropping of undesirable litter. Street tree species are generally selected for their ability to beneficially modify microclimate by providing shade and/or provide an aesthetic experience through seasonal leaf color and flowering. Street tree species are also selected by desired growth habit for the scale of the space in which they would be planted.
19. **Tree Lawn.** The linear space between the back of curb and sidewalk for planting trees, flowers, grass and shrubs. Tree lawns may be existing, reclaimed or newly developed. Because they are set aside for landscaping, tree lawns shall not be used for ornaments, fencing, lighting, artwork, or parking. A tree lawn with associated elements is illustrated below.



**20. Tree Lawn Reclamation (a/k/a “restoration”).** Construction or reconstruction of a tree lawn where none presently exists that is consistent with adjacent tree lawns and similar to tree lawns that formerly existed in this area.

**21. Tree Well.** The opening in the sidewalk used for tree planting. It is usually smaller than a tree lawn, and is often used when the physical space between a building façade or the stoop of a building and the back of the curb remains after incorporating an ADA-compliant sidewalk does not allow sufficient space for a tree lawn. Like tree lawns, tree wells may either be existing, reclaimed or newly developed. Because they are set aside for landscaping, tree wells shall be used only for trees and no other objects, or parking. A tree well with associated elements is illustrated below.



*Illustration by Gordon Dettrey*

#### IV. DESIGN GUIDELINES:

In order to provide for an attractive, consistent treatment, the following design guidelines will be employed in the review and consideration of proposed tree lawns or tree wells by the City of Savannah:

1. **Generally.** The City of Savannah shall review and approve all new or reconstructed tree lawns. This includes review of plans and tree species selection based on the proper horizontal and vertical scale, appropriateness for the context and consistency with adjacent tree lawn. All new and reclaimed tree lawns and tree wells shall have trees planted in them, where possible and per an approved plan, at the time a tree lawn is established or restored.
  
2. **Tree Lawns – Scale - Horizontal.** The size, shape and type of tree to be planted within a new or reclaimed tree lawn shall be governed by the size of abutting right-of-way, cross-sectional dimensions of the street it fronts, and the need to provide the necessary sidewalk for the volume of pedestrians utilizing the same, as determined by Traffic Engineering as part of their review. Generally, the amount of space available for the planting of trees is what is left over once an unobstructed four to five-foot wide sidewalk is subtracted from the horizontal distance from the outermost projection of the building façade to the inside of the curb measured perpendicular to the building façade. For instance, if the distance perpendicular from the outermost projection of the building at ground level to the back of curb at the street measures 12 feet, once you subtract four feet for the sidewalk, there is potentially a maximum of eight feet for the construction of a tree lawn. However, there are additional factors that can further reduce the frontage depth available for tree lawns. These include:
  - a. Additional sidewalk width beyond the minimum four feet to achieve or maintain a pedestrian level of service where the opposing stream of pedestrian traffic makes a noticeable influence on the other's foot path such that some lateral variations in foot path are observed.

- b. Hardscape encroachments into the right-of-way as approved by the City including stairs, stoops, low awnings, bollards, planters, etc.
- b. Bus stops, parking kiosks, fire hydrants, utility poles and other city infrastructure.
- c. Approved driveways.
- d. Low-hanging tree branches.

**3. Tree Lawns – Scale – Vertical.** The maximum mature size of trees that can be planted in a tree lawn is also limited by infrastructure and other obstructions both above and below the proposed tree lawn. These include:

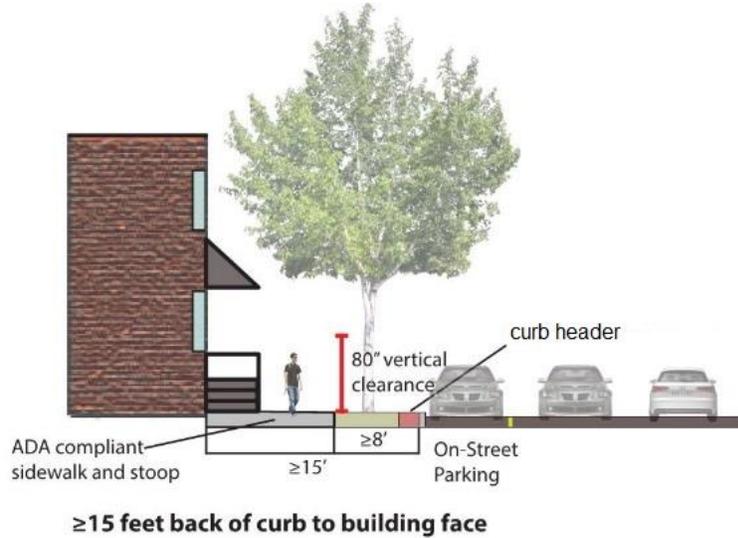
- a. Overhead electrical, cable TV and telephone wires suspended on poles and connecting to adjacent structures that limit the maximum growth height.
- b. Building obstructions such as awnings, roof overhangs, bay windows and signage.
- c. Underground utilities such as potable water mains and services, sewer laterals, underground electrical services, cable TV, fiber optic communication lines, etc.

Overhead and underground infrastructure can create conflict with trees ultimately causing damage to underground facilities and unsightly damage to trees that must be excessively pruned to avoid entanglement with overhead wires and damage to awnings and building facades. Trees can create obstructions to the repair of underground utilities, and consequently are injured when repairs have to be made.

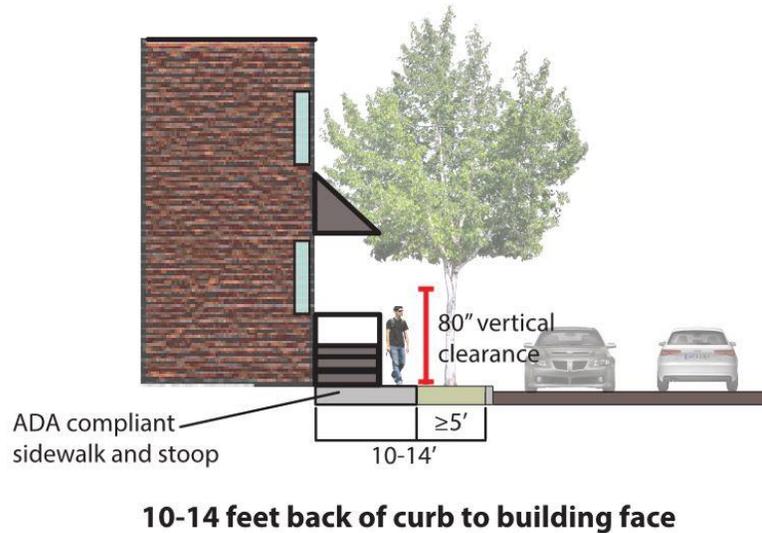
In addition, in order to meet ADA requirements, sidewalks are required to maintain 80 inches of vertical clearance directly overhead to be considered “unobstructed”. All new construction must comply with ADA requirements. When retrofitted tree lawns are being installed in the National Landmark Historic District, some allowances can be made based on historic precedence.

**4. Tree Lawns – Size.** Based on the available horizontal distance as previously described, the following shall govern the size of proposed tree lawns and the type of street trees that can be planted:

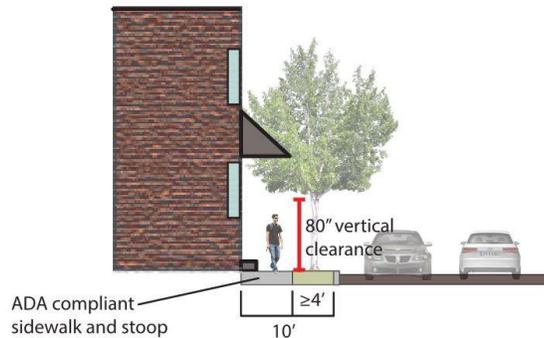
- a. Back of curb to property line/building façade 15 feet or greater: minimum eight-foot wide tree lawn allowing large canopy trees. This section is large enough to accommodate most features, including sidewalks, trees and other landscaping, curb header, crossovers, etc.



- b. Back of curb to property line/building façade 10 feet to 14 feet: minimum five-foot wide tree lawn allowing medium canopy trees.



- c. Back of curb to property line/building façade less than 10 feet: minimum four-foot wide tree lawn allowing small trees. In some cases it might be possible to plant small trees in a narrower tree lawn where brick paving or pervious concrete paving stones are used for the sidewalk. These are approved at the discretion of the Park and Tree, Street Maintenance, and Traffic Engineering departments.



**≥10 feet back of curb to building face**

Note: Where back of curb to stoop does not allow for ADA compliant sidewalk and tree well, tree well may be offset between stoops.

- d. The length of a new or restored tree lawn shall be as long as fitting within the outer property boundary lines of the adjacent fronting property projected out to the curb, if such space exists without restrictions or obstacles.
- e. Where space allows for a tree lawn of five feet or wider, and where on-street adjacent parking exists, a minimum one-foot wide curb-header may be established parallel to the curb.
- f. Tree wells: In some cases, tree wells may be employed to plant small trees where available space does not allow for both an ADA-compliant sidewalk and four-foot wide tree lawn. In such instances, the minimum width can be reduced to three feet, as long as the tree well can maintain at least nine to 15 square feet of rooting area, depending on the tree species and sidewalk material.
- g. Special cases: It is recognized that planting trees in smaller areas than previously discussed herein may be possible. In instances where available depth for tree lawns or tree wells is less than three feet, the

Park and Tree Department will consider proposals utilizing smaller trees to accommodate smaller planting areas on a case-by-case basis.

5. **Tree Lawns – Tree Spacing.** Based on the growth habit of selected trees, tree plantings shall adhere to the following spacing minimums:
  - a. Large canopy trees: 25-foot minimum distance from adjacent trees.
  - b. Medium canopy trees: 20-foot minimum distance from adjacent trees.
  - c. Small trees: 15-foot minimum distance from adjacent trees.
  - d. Tree placement must adhere to all City of Savannah Code of Ordinance requirements dealing with clearances in the right of way including, but not limited to, not being planted within 25 feet in front of traffic signs; within 10 feet either side or behind traffic signs; or within three feet of hydrants, traffic signal infrastructure, and street lights. Exceptions may be considered on a case-by-case basis provided that visibility and access is maintained.
6. **Tree Lawns – Species selection.** It is the intent of the Tree Lawn Policy to provide a unified streetscape on a block-by-block basis. When a tree lawn is renovated or reclaimed for 1-2 lots along a block, the trees that are selected should match or be visually compatible with the predominant existing species found in tree lawns on that block. Where development or redevelopment of an entire block is to occur, then the selected tree species should match or be visually compatible with those existing on the opposite side of the street. The exception to this requirement occurs when existing trees are due for replacement in the near future.

## V. POLICIES:

The following policies pertain to the landscaping, care, and maintenance of new and existing tree lawns pursuant to the City of Savannah's Codes including the Landscape and Tree Protection Ordinance. Compliance with these policies will be enforced by the Park & Tree Department and other city departments, as follows:

1. **Trees in Tree Lawns:** Trees in tree lawns and their care, maintenance, pruning and removal is the exclusive jurisdiction of the City Park and Tree

Department. A property owner may request that a tree be planted within an existing tree lawn by the Park & Tree Department by calling 311. Should a property owner wish to plant a tree within an existing tree lawn, a written request shall be submitted to and approved by the Park and Tree Department and the tree species, size, quality and method of aftercare will be considered. A City of Savannah Right of Way Permit shall be obtained prior to any tree planting.

- 2. Responsibility for Tree Lawns:** The maintenance, improvement and landscaping of tree lawns shall be the responsibility of the owner of the adjacent property (excluding trees as noted in Item 1 above). For the sole purpose of carrying out these responsibilities for existing tree lawns, property owners are not required to submit a plan of improvement so long as such landscaping meets all of the policies, specifications, and regulations described herein and conforms to City Ordinances. Landscape maintenance practices that are deemed to be detrimental to the health of trees planted in tree lawns are prohibited. These include the use of herbicides, shrub and groundcover planting practices that involve digging holes inside the critical root zone.
- 3. Improvements and Landscaping of Tree Lawns:** Improvements and landscaping shall only include organic live plants that can and are planted in the ground. Such plant material shall include only grass, ground covers, and shrubs (see Trees in Item 1 above). No other object or product other than organic mulch shall be placed on a tree lawn. Exceptions to the foregoing are underground irrigation apparatus, historic markers, or approved lighting and signage as permitted by City Ordinance. These noted exceptions will require an approved encroachment permit from City Council.
- 4. Prohibited Items in Tree Lawns:** The following items are prohibited in tree lawns including but not limited to stones, rocks, gravel, statuary, fountains, pedestals, equipment, tools, supplies, unapproved lighting, unapproved signage, furniture, ceramics, pottery, planters, lawn edging, barriers or fence, of any kind.

- 5. Conditions of Planting and Landscaping:** If no tree is planted on an existing tree lawn, landscaping and plantings shall be at the discretion of the property owner except that no plant may be more than thirty-six (36) inches in height above the level of the adjacent driving surface at any time. Landscaping with shrubs on tree lawns that contain a tree shall be limited to plantings in the periphery zone of the tree lawn not to exceed twelve (12) inches from its outer edge to avoid planting near a tree's root crown. Additionally, any planting in the periphery zone of a tree lawn or other areas of a tree lawn containing a tree shall not contribute to soil compaction, involve trenching or result in the cutting of tree roots.
- 6. Care and Maintenance of Tree Lawns:** Property owners shall be responsible for mowing grass, mulching, picking up litter, removing dead vegetation, keeping the area of tree lawns clean, and maintaining the height of plantings to 36 inches or less (as noted in Item 5 above).
- 7. Creation or Reclamation of Tree Lawns:** Property owners engaged in new or improved non-residential or multi-family development within the City of Savannah are required to build a tree lawn site ready for planting and landscaping if a tree lawn does not exist, except as provided herein. A newly built tree lawn must include the planting of a tree(s) in accordance with the requirements herein. A plan for such construction shall be consistent with the applicable City Ordinances and this booklet.
- 8. Prohibitions:** As provided in the City's Landscape and Tree Protection Ordinance, actions that are considered damaging to City trees are a violation of City Code (Section 8-11012). Such actions include:

  - a. Removal of a tree lawn or a tree,
  - b. Pruning a tree,
  - c. Parking on tree lawns,
  - d. Attaching anything to a tree.
- 9. Compliance, Enforcement and Complaints:** A property owner that has not complied with these tree lawn policies and regulations may be held in

violation of City Code and required to provide remediation. Furthermore, the City shall have the right to remove unpermitted materials, and exercise its full powers granted under City Code. Any violation or complaint can be reported to the City through the 311 telephone system.

- 10. Conflicts:** In the event that the above tree lawn policies and regulations conflict with an ordinance, the ordinance will prevail.

## **VI. APPROVAL PROCESS:**

Any property owner required by City Code or desiring to renovate, reclaim, or establish a tree lawn or tree well must submit an application to the Park and Tree Department as well as obtain a Right of Way Permit from Traffic Engineering.

The following section is intended to assist the applicant by providing an overview of the approval process. While it is preferred that an appropriate professional be employed to determine design requirements based on specific context, the property owner may undertake the process themselves. When this occurs, it is strongly recommended that the property owner contact the Park and Tree Department to determine what needs to be submitted based on the proposed scope of work. Sometimes a meeting with the City of Savannah's staff at Site Plan Review (SPR) for a courtesy review prior to the development of any plans could be necessary. This will enable property owners to discover design and permitting requirements from the various City departments as they pertain to their specific location, any spatial limitations, and to avoid unrealistic expectations and multiple iterations of review. This can be arranged by contacting the Development Review Department at (912) 651-6510.

- 1. Step One - Submittals:** Following an informal review by City staff, if necessary, the applicant must submit a tree lawn proposal to the City of Savannah Park and Tree Department at 2600 Bull Street, Savannah, Georgia 31401. This plan must include sufficient information to illustrate the proposed design in detail so that City Staff can make an informed assessment of its contextual appropriateness and evaluate any public safety issues that might pertain. Specific submittal requirements include but are not

limited to: photographs of the existing context, measured drawings of existing conditions and proposed improvements, historic photographs, etc.

2. **Step Two – Review:** Upon receipt of the application the Park and Tree Department shall then review the plans and configuration of all new tree lawns and tree wells and make a timely recommendation to the applicant regarding conceptual approval or denial. If conceptually approved, the plan will be distributed to all applicable City departments for review and comments. If there are no objections to the proposed plan then the applicant will be notified of such and directed to get the necessary permits to proceed. If the proposed plan is denied the reason for such shall be supplied to the applicant.
3. **Step Three – Permits Needed:** Upon approval of a concept plan, the applicant shall be required to secure the following permits as necessary:
  - a. **Approved Encroachment Petition:** An approved encroachment petition allows the applicant to utilize the City’s rights-of-way for proposed hardscape improvements such as stoops, planters, irrigation systems, and requires approval of the City Council. Contact the City’s Real Property Services Department at 912-651-6524 to determine if an encroachment petition is required and to obtain application procedures. In most cases the information provided as described in the above submittal for review, in addition to the required application and fee, should be sufficient. In addition to the previously described information, the applicant will be required to sign an agreement acknowledging the terms of a maintenance agreement between the City and the applicant as a condition of approval.
  - b. **City of Savannah Right of Way Permit:** A rights-of-way utilization permit must be obtained from the City’s Traffic Engineering Department for any work that is proposed within the City’s rights-of-way which includes sidewalks. This application is available on the Traffic Engineering Department page on the city’s web site, at [www.savannahga.gov](http://www.savannahga.gov). The application provides all requirements for construction to take place in the City’s right-of-way, such as utility

location prior to work starting, traffic management and other issues. The permit is reviewed by City staff to approve and identify any conditions of approval based on the proposed work.

## **VII. ENFORCEMENT AND COMPLIANCE:**

Failure of a property owner to follow the procedures described herein may result in the property owner being subject to penalties as proscribed in the various code enforcement areas of the City of Savannah's Code of Ordinances, including but not limited to the Landscape and Tree Protection Ordinance and life safety components of the City's Zoning Ordinance. A summary list of possible violations is as follows:

- 1. Constructing a tree lawn without securing the required permits-**  
Violations may result in:
  - a. Notice of Violation issued by the Park and Tree Department pursuant to Sec. 8-11011 giving the violator seven days to bring the tree lawn into compliance with the regulations. Failure to abide by these provisions may also result in a monetary fine as per City Code.
  - b. Stop work order issued relating to all construction activities, for as long as the violation exists.
  - c. For the purposes of this action, the violation exists until the unpermitted work is removed, or a permit is issued by the appropriate departments.
  - d. Issuance of a citation requiring appearance in Recorder's Court.
  
- 2. Removal, or pruning, of an existing tree without a permit-** Violations may result in:
  - a. Notice of Violation issued by the Park and Tree Department pursuant to Sec. 8-11012, which includes provisions for monetary fines as per the City Code.

- b. In addition to possible fines, a violator will be required to pay the City of Savannah the appraised value of the tree that was removed, or loss of value if improperly pruned, as determined by a qualified third-party ISA arborist whose appraisal fee and any other costs incurred by the City would be paid by the violator as well.
  - c. If removal is necessary due to damages, all costs associated with removal of the tree, removal of the stump and tree replacement will be paid by the violator.
  - d. Issuance of a citation requiring appearance in Recorder's Court.
- 3. Removal and/or replacement of an existing city sidewalk and/or historic curbing without required permits - Violations may result in:**
  - a. A stop work order applicable to all construction activities.
  - b. Issuance of a citation resulting in fines, appearance in Recorder's Court and repayment of all costs incurred by the City.
- 4. Failure to maintain a tree lawn- Violations may result in:**
  - a. Citation to appear in Recorder's Court following the statutory period to comply.
  - b. Possible fines levied by the court and cost of City maintenance efforts.

## **VIII. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

For more information, the applicant is encouraged to contact:

City of Savannah ([www.savannahga.gov](http://www.savannahga.gov) )

- Park and Tree: (912) 651-6610
- Real Property Services (Encroachment Petitions): (912) 651-6524
- Traffic Engineering Department (Right of Way Permits): (912) 651-6600
- 3-1-1 Call Center (Report Violations): Dial 311

The Metropolitan Planning Commission ([www.thempc.org](http://www.thempc.org))

- Historic Preservation Department (The MPC): (912) 651-1440

#### Non-Governmental Agencies

- Savannah Tree Foundation: (912) 233-8733 [www.savannahtree.com](http://www.savannahtree.com)