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Free trees available to some residents

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The price is right.

A \$13,500 state urban forestry grant will enable the city of Great Falls to plant about 250 new street trees in the city boulevard district, city forester Jon Thompson said Friday.

Thompson said the new trees will be paid for through the state's Urban and Community Forest Program in the state Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

In addition, the city will plant the trees.

People whose boulevards have lost trees to Dutch elm disease are prime candidates for the new trees, Thompson said.

He said each tree will sport a trunk about 1.25 inches in diameter, and will be seven or eight feet tall.

"Everybody within the boulevard district is eligible for this," Thompson said.

The city's boulevard district, in the older parts of town, charges residents an annual assessment to cover the costs of maintaining trees, including tree trimming and removal of diseased boulevard trees.

About 4,200 properties lie within the district, which covers the city's older neighborhoods and a small area of the West Side.

Thompson said the city planted few street trees in recent years because of a shortage of money. This year's state grant is a nice shot in the arm, he said.

Thompson said the city wants to plant trees at the request of residents because officials then know the people will be able to assist in watering the trees. That will help the trees stay moist and healthy.

In recent years, drought has been hard on the city's older trees, notably the elms and green ashes. Additionally, warmer winters have failed to kill off many of the beetles that attack older trees.

"The trees are stressed," Thompson said.

Last year, the city of Great Falls lost 245 elm trees, including 156 trees on private property, 76 trees on city boulevards and 13 in city parks, Thompson said. In 2006, 76 elm trees had to be removed in the city.

"We had a spike last year," Thompson said.

The city's boulevard district covers about half of Great Falls, and boasts 15,517 trees at last count, he said. About half of those are the older green ash trees, planted in inside rows closer to houses. Elms

were planted close to streets and avenues.

"We've still got 1,500 boulevard elm trees left," Thompson said, adding there is room for about 30,000 trees in the district.

Since Dutch elm disease struck a few decades ago, the city has replaced lost trees with a variety of species to lessen the chances of one disease devastating the city's boulevard trees.

A plan several years ago to expand the boulevard district to the entire city failed in the City Commission after people complained about paying an additional assessment. The proposal would have enabled the city to plant more trees.

Thompson said there are more than 15,000 additional street trees in Great Falls outside the city's formal district. However, the state tree grant applies only to the boulevard district.

Extra trees are a boon to a city's environment, helping cool the city in summer, and converting carbon dioxide in the air into oxygen, Thompson said.

"They sequester carbon," he said.

Thompson said the city might be able to benefit in the future by getting paid for helping reduce greenhouse gases in the atmosphere as a result of having the trees. That potential revenue, which would come through a carbon-credit program, perhaps could be used to buy more trees, he said.

The U.S. Forest Service estimates urban forests in the United States perform \$14.3 billion worth of carbon storage by capturing about 700 million tons of carbon inside the trees.

However, there's no guarantee such a reimbursement program will come about, Thompson said.

In the meantime, the city will be happy to plant 250 new trees on city boulevards this year.

But call soon. Trees will be reserved on a first-come, first-served basis, beginning today Thompson said. A new tree will not be planted if the boulevard already contains a sufficient number of trees, he added.
