

PRINCETON ENVIRONMENTAL COMMISSION
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M E M O R A N D U M

To: The Mayor of Princeton and the Princeton Council

From: Matthew Wasserman, Chair of the Princeton Environmental Commission

Date: October 3, 2014

Re: **Leaf and Brush Ordinance**

The Princeton Environmental Commission (PEC) has reviewed the Council's proposed leaf collection schedule for the town of Princeton.

The PEC understands that for years, many Princeton homeowners have piled leaves at the curb for fall pickup by the municipality. People have become accustomed to this convenient service. That said, many communities across the United States have abandoned this practice because it imposes a tax burden on homeowners and is environmentally unsustainable. Similarly, Princeton has made pledges to reduce our own energy and waste.

As part of this commitment, in 2010, the PEC proposed a new leaf management approach (Leave the Leaves as described below) which we believe is both better for our community and the environment. By implementing these easy, creative solutions, we can enrich our soil, prevent water pollution, and become an even greener community while also reducing expenses. The Leave the Leaves campaign will serve to educate residents and to help them start changing their leaf removal, because the PEC is recommending an eventual decrease in leaf pick up collection and/or possible elimination of street leaf collection in some areas.

The comments and recommendations outlined below are submitted by the PEC for the consideration of the Princeton Town Council.

Issues with the Current "Leaves at the Curb" approach

Safety: Leaves on the street force cars out across the center line, attract children and can cause fires when hot mufflers or catalytic converters touch dry leaves. Where there are no sidewalks, pedestrians and bicyclists are forced towards the center of the street. Street flooding when storm drains get blocked adds to these problems.

Increased Flooding: The annual mass removal of leaves from the urban landscape reduces organic matter in urban soils. This decreases the soil's permeability, which increases flooding in local streams.

Water Pollution: Appearances are deceiving. The streets we walk on, drive on and dump yard waste onto are essentially dry creek beds, directly linked to Princeton's streams. As residents are currently asked to place leaves in the street, these leaves get rained on, start to decompose, and then release nutrient pollution into waterways before the leaves can be picked up.

Energy consumption: Piling leaves on the curb for pickup triggers a highly mechanized chain of events. The leaves must be hauled out of town, ground up, windrowed by heavy machinery, and then hauled back into town for use in landscaping. If homeowners instead use or compost their own leaves in their yards, we can reduce greenhouse gas emissions and fight global warming.

Expense and diversion of staff from other municipal services: Leaf collection increases wear and tear on town vehicles and draws town crews away from other services they would otherwise provide year-round. Princeton also ends up bearing the financial burden of disposing of other towns' leaves as we become a 'dumping ground' for landscapers whose towns don't have a leaf pick-up program.

PEC Proposed Solutions and Recommendations

1. Leave the Leaves Initiative

The PEC recommends Council adopt a "Leave the Leaves" approach to leaf management. There are many reasons to think of leaves as an asset rather than a burden and these relatively simple procedures benefit soil and plants, reduce fuel use and keep our air cleaner:

- The simplest thing to do is to **rake or blow leaves into your woodlot**, if available, or in an obscured portion of your yard such as behind shrubs.
- **Mulch leaves with a mower** so they can disappear back into the lawn. The fragmented leaves can also be raked onto flower beds as a mulch—a technique particularly appropriate for owners of small lots. Some leaves, like those of silver maples, crinkle-up and all but disappear into the lawn on their own, even before mowing. For thick, persistent leaves like those from a red oak, a corral or the mulch mower approach will keep them from blowing back into the yard. Though a mower with a mulching blade would be optimal, all power mowers should do an adequate job.
- **Spread leaves on garden** and leave them there to hold in moisture, suppress weeds, keep the soil cool in the summer, and slowly release nutrients. Planting tomatoes, for instance, requires nothing more than parting the leaves to put the new plants in. The leaf mulch reduces rotting of any tomatoes that touch the ground.
- **Create a leaf corral.** A corral or circle of wire fencing will help contain the leaves and keep them from blowing around. A readily available fencing is 3 feet high, green, and comes in rolls at the local hardware store. The corral is essentially invisible when tucked in a back corner of the lot. A U-shape may be preferred so that leaves can be raked right into the enclosure rather than lifted over the fencing. The leaf pile quickly reduces in size over the winter. The leaves can be left to decompose, acting like a sponge to catch the rain, and releasing nutrients to benefit the health of all trees and other landscaping in the vicinity. Contrary to popular notions of composting, it is not necessary to laboriously turn the pile. Leaf piles do not create odors.
- **Use leaves to control weeds** by raking them towards the fence line where they can serve as a mulch to keep down weeds that often dominate there. Dump leaves on any other weeds or groundcovers that are getting out of control. A thick layer of leaves discourages weeds. For weeds or groundcovers strong enough to push up through the leaves, first place overlapping pieces of cardboard on the undesired plants, then use the leaves over top to hide the cardboard. Both will decompose over time.
- If the leaves must leave the property, bag them.

2. Public Education

We request that the Department of Public Works create a public education campaign/project to better inform the public of the leaf and brush collection process, provide advanced warning of fines, and most importantly, direct homeowners toward the new "leave the leaves" approach. Existing opportunities for education that the town can take advantage of are the annual mailer that goes out with the leaf schedule, the town website, and the town-wide phone calls reminding residents when it's their week for leaf pick-up. The PEC and Sustainable Princeton are willing and able to assist with this education initiative. In addition, there are resources available from other communities

that have already tackled this challenge, for example the [lele website](#).

3. *We recommend that the Council set a timeline to move towards reduced leaf pick up or no leaf pick up to most properties. Alternatively, a scaled back option is to conduct a pilot program.* One could perform a **town audit** to determine which neighborhoods (based on wooded areas and the number of trees on the property) would be best suited to test the “leave the leaves” approach in lieu of curbside pick ups.
4. *We request that the PW Department keep a database of leaf and brush cost (fuel, wages, vehicle maintenance) and tonnage for further analysis in evaluating the cost effectiveness of the Leave the Leaves program for the Town.*
5. *The PEC requests that Princeton Council direct the Department of Public Works not to deviate from the existing collection schedules* to accommodate individual homeowners who do not comply with the current schedules. It is our understanding that these non-emergency single-user piles lead to the Department of Public Works’ difficulty in adhering to the current leaf and brush collection schedules.
6. *We recommend that the Municipality evaluate the practice of leaf removal that they use for their buildings and properties and move towards the Leave the Leaf approach as well.*
7. *We recommend that as a requirement to receive their annual permit, all landscapers operating in the town receive “leave the leaves” training.* This could be as simple as having them: 1) view the 5 minute lele video; and 2) read and sign the “leave the leaves” pledge sheet. Bumper stickers could be handed out to those landscapers that comply.
8. *We request that the Department of Public Works and Princeton Council further separate and distinguish ‘leaves’ from ‘brush collection’* in their leaf and brush collection mailers, charts and discussions to increase awareness.

In conclusion, we applaud the Mayor and the Council for their efforts to balance homeowner expectations with the realities of capacity, costs, and the town’s efforts to reduce energy consumption and waste. We appreciate the consideration of the eight recommendations we have made above to support your efforts.

cc: Princeton Environmental Commission
Princeton Council members