

IDENTIFYING AND APPRAISING HAZARD TREES

Learning how to spot and handle them

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Hazard trees have recently been the focus of various lawsuits centering on liability for damages and personal injury. As the name implies, hazard trees are those that are defective or positioned in such a way that they can cause damage to the property and rights of others.

An Overview

Hazard trees are specific and something different than hazard tree rights, which are typically acquired by an easement. These rights are commonly obtained by utility companies or the Department of Transportation on land adjoining specific rights of way. The easement gives the easement holder the right to remove hazard trees over a specific time period.

Hazard trees are named as such because of the hazards they can cause. They can be sound, hardy trees, but if they have a strong lean into private, public or utility right of way, they can cause considerable damage when high winds take them down.



Identifying the Risks

Hazard trees are often defective and can be visibly identified by splits, cracks or conks (fruiting bodies of fungus). They also can be spindly, crowded trees with thin, small crowns that can barely support growth. These trees can die within a year and then are very susceptible to breakage. Of course, hazard trees can also be dead trees.

Some hazard trees are virtually impossible to identify because defects from various fungus, decay and insects show up internally. These, unfortunately, are not discovered until a tree is cut and the bole exposed.

Appraisal and Valuations

Once trees are discovered and identified, basic tree appraisal methods are used to determine their value. Always begin by determining the Highest and Best Use (HBU) of the property on which the trees are growing. Next, think of tree value in terms of what each contributes to overall property value. Tree appraisal is not the cost to replace one tree with a duplicate.

For trees on HBU forestland, timber values apply. In this scenario trees are valued by the cord, board foot or ton as part of stumpage. Stumpage is the rate paid for the rights that timber producers pay for trees as they stand.

Residential trees are often best appraised by their contribution to overall property value. Various studies show that residential trees contribute up to 25 percent of land value. Begin by estimating property value and then separate improvement (buildings) value. What is then left is land, trees and landscaping. If land is worth \$50,000 and the natural trees and landscape is above average, then tree and landscape value would be about 20 percent, so there would be \$10,000 in total tree value. If there were 50 trees on the lot, the average contribution to value would be \$200 per tree. Next allocate tree values to size, condition, species and location. The highest value should be assigned to those trees in front yards and less to those located in the rear and side. Large trees in good condition with spreading crowns often have the property's highest value.

Trees on commercial or industrial sites often contribute less value than those on residential land. For these property types, the cost of replanting smaller trees of good quality can be considered as one valuation approach.

In Summary

Always remember that hazard trees are named that for a reason. Many owners know this and recognize that these trees are a liability. Keep this in mind with any valuation. In some situations, hazard trees have no value at all. Take-downs are expensive and often greatly exceed tree value.

Finally, be sure to test your tree appraisal for reasonableness. Ask if the value makes sense in light of tree condition and overall property value. You will want to provide a fair and accurate appraisal. 🌳



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