

Keeping the Right of Way Clear of Vegetation Obstructions

Part of the land in the city of Portland is dedicated as “public right of way” for streets, sidewalks, utilities, and similar public uses. These areas are for everyone’s use. To protect public health and safety, it is important to keep streets, sidewalks, walkways, and other public right of way areas free of vegetation obstructions. In most cases, investigation of code violations and enforcement action happen when a citizen reports a potential violation. This backgrounder provides information on where to report a vegetation obstruction.

The value of trees and vegetation

Trees, shrubs, and other plants play an important role in keeping Portland green and safe. Trees and well-maintained vegetation are highly valued elements in Portland neighborhoods and provide many benefits. The presence of trees, shrubs, and other lower-growing vegetation can transform a barren space into a pleasant, welcoming, and well-used place and influence the health and well-being of a community. Property owners, both public and private, need to be conscious about where they place and how they manage vegetation in light of visibility and safety concerns. Well-placed and well-maintained trees and vegetation can have a positive affect on people’s behavior and perception, resulting in improved safety.

A property owner’s responsibility

Streets, sidewalks, and other public rights of way are for everyone’s use. They add value to private property by providing access to the property and a way to get to other places in the city. Property owners are responsible for maintaining part of the public right of way adjacent to their property, including the sidewalk, planting strip, shoulder, unpaved alleys, walkways, and roadways to the center. Overgrown trees and shrubs endanger everyone when they block the view of traffic signs, signals, vehicles, and people or block a path or walkway. Trimming vegetation and caring for street trees are effective ways citizens and public works agencies can enhance neighborhood safety.

Keeping vegetation trimmed

It is important to keep vegetation planted in the right of way trimmed back to prevent visibility obstructions. If overhanging vegetation is blocking visibility on streets, sidewalks, alleys, and other public right of way areas, it is the responsibility of the adjacent property owner to trim or remove it. All trees must be trimmed to maintain a clearance of 7.5 feet over sidewalks, 11 feet over a local street, and 14 feet over an arterial street.

All intersections must have clear visibility for the traveling public. To ensure adequate sight distance at intersections, trees must meet appropriate setbacks and shrubs and other vegetation must meet height requirements. A tree or large shrub at the corner of a street that blocks the ability of a driver to see if traffic is coming from another street is a hazard.

It is also important to keep traffic signs and signals free of vegetation obstructions. A tree, shrub, or other vegetation that blocks the view of signs, signals, and intersections is a potential hazard. Report such potential hazards to the Bureau of Transportation at 503-823-1700.

To report a vegetation obstruction of a street, sidewalk, path, or other right of way area, call the following:

- For vegetation originating on private property, call the Bureau of Development Services Neighborhood Inspections Complaint Line at 503-823-CODE (2633);
- For vegetation originating on public property, call the Bureau of Transportation at 503-823-1700.

Vegetation overgrowth between private properties that does not encroach on the public right of way is a civil matter and should be resolved by the property owners.

Caring for street trees

Property owners are responsible for the care and maintenance of the street trees adjacent to their property. Street trees are those trees growing in the public right of way generally between the curb and the sidewalk. Before you plant, prune, or remove a tree on this land, you must obtain a free permit from the Parks Bureau Urban Forestry program. For permit information and guidance, contact Urban Forestry at 503-823-4489.

To ensure safe passage for everyone, tree limbs over streets and sidewalks must meet the following standards:

- when a tree abuts a sidewalk, its limbs must be 7.5 feet above the surface;
- when a tree abuts a local street, its limbs must be 11 feet above the surface; and
- when a tree abuts an arterial street, its limbs must be 14 feet above the surface.

To report a concern about a particular street tree, contact Urban Forestry at 503-823-4489. In most cases, trees interfering with visibility and safety for the traveling public must be trimmed by the property owner, who must obtain the proper permit. Contact your power utility if tree limbs are interfering with power lines.

Maintaining sidewalks

Property owners are responsible for maintaining the sidewalks adjacent to their property. They must make sure that cracks or breaks, vegetation, debris, litter, garbage, and snow and ice do not pose a hazard to pedestrians. Report a sidewalk repair concern to the Bureau of Transportation at 503-823-1711.

Reporting a vegetation obstruction

To report a potential code violation, use the phone numbers or online resources listed below. Be prepared to provide your name, address, phone or email; the exact address of the property you wish to report; and the nature of your concern. Please note that the complainant information is kept confidential.

Work is prioritized by safety concerns, and the City’s response is dependent on available crews and resources, weather, the length of the growing season, and impacts of early or extended rainfall.

Concern	Contact
Vegetation obstruction from private property Vegetation originating on private property encroaching onto the public right of way	Portland Bureau of Development Services 503-823-CODE (2633) www.portlandonline.com/bds
Vegetation obstruction from public property Vegetation originating on public property encroaching onto the public right of way	Portland Bureau of Transportation 503-823-1700
Vegetation obstruction of traffic sign or signal Vegetation originating on private or public property obstructing the view of a traffic sign or signal	Portland Bureau of Transportation 503-823-1700
Tree concerns Tree limbs growing low over the street or sidewalk Tree limbs broken and hanging over the street or sidewalk Trees down in the right of way or park land Trees damaged or dead in the right of way or park land	Portland Parks Bureau - Urban Forestry 503-823-4489
Tree planting, pruning, or removal Obtain a tree permit to plant, prune, or remove a tree growing in the public right of way	Portland Parks Bureau - Urban Forestry 503-823-4489
Vegetation interfering with power lines	Pacific Power 1-888-221-7070 Portland General Electric 503-228-6322
Sidewalk damage Broken or damaged sidewalk creating a hazard	Portland Bureau of Transportation 503-823-1711
Adopt-a-landscape program Inquire about a volunteer program to adopt and maintain a public landscaped area	Portland Bureau of Transportation 503-823-1700