



# FULTON COUNTY TAXPAYERS FOUNDATION

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October 2008

## Atlanta's Questionable HR Policies: *A Need for Enforceable Performance Metrics*

By Tom Coffin, fired Sr. Arborist for the City of Atlanta

### Background

On July 29, I was summoned to a noon meeting with Ibrahim Maslamani, Director of the Bureau of Buildings in the City of Atlanta. This was the first meeting we had had since Mr. Maslamani promoted me in October 2007 to a newly-created position of Senior Arborist in charge of field operations in the Arborist Division.

It was also our last meeting. Without warning, without explanation, without cause, without a shred of due process, Mr. Maslamani fired me.

News travels fast in the internet age. Within hours phone calls and email messages of concern, despair and outrage were piling up in the offices of the Mayor and City Council. Within a day Channels 2 and 11 presented on-air interviews with me and others. The *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, *Creative Loafing*, the *Buckhead Reporter* and other media soon reported on the event. The *New York Times* lead with the story, including photographs, in its National section on August 6. The Associated Press distributed a report to its affiliates. Internet blogs too numerous to count weighed in. Even the Fulton County Taxpayers Foundation demanded an explanation after more than 50 of its members protested vehemently to its president, John Sherman.

### The Extent of the Problem

Why the uproar over the dismissal of a single field arborist, a supervisor of only three people? Many

more city employees had recently been "RIF"ed in the wake of a mysterious and yet unexplained "severe budget shortfall" in the city's General Fund. In this "crisis" the Bureau of Buildings chose to dismiss many of its senior people, including a number of the hardest-working office support personnel, key high-rise and residential building inspectors and several persons in critical decision-making roles with working lifetimes of dedicated service to the city. Untold knowledge and experience and invaluable institutional memory were lost.

Like me, these people lost their jobs through no fault of their own. Their dismissals were unjustified by their work performance. Like me, they were given a half-hour to clear their desks and clear the building. Unlike me, they and others recently "RIF"ed have largely been ignored.

So, again, why the uproar? There are several reasons. First, my position was funded. I think it likely that my job too was on the budget crisis chopping block. In a surprise move, however, the City Council voted to support the Arborist Division from the Tree Trust Fund rather than the General Fund. Had my job disappeared in that ugly and unfair episode, my firing too would have been seen as a justified and normal response to a budget shortfall.

### Tom Coffin's Track Record

Initially spared, however, I apparently was not forgotten. Within weeks of the large-scale elimination

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of jobs and people for economic reasons, I was fired for “personnel reasons” too “sensitive” to explain, even to me. My firing was orchestrated from above, though how high above has yet to be determined. In a July 30 email exchange between Mr. Maslamani and Planning Commissioner Steven Cover “Re: firing of Tom Coffin”, Maslamani worries that “The emails and phone calls started yesterday.” Mr. Cover replies almost immediately: “Hang in there and stick with our plan. Give Luz a heads up.” “Luz” apparently refers to Deputy Chief Operating Officer Luz Borrero, who works out of the Mayor’s office. *Neither her nor Cover’s role have been explained.*

A second and more major reason that people were upset by my firing was concern for the city’s Tree Protection Ordinance. My reputation is rooted in work on and support for this law. I was appointed to the Tree Conservation Commission at its inception in 1997. I chaired the committee that did the initial rewrite of the ordinance, passed in 1999. I was one of the initial field arborists hired in 2000 to implement the law. I attended every meeting of two separate task forces formed by the City Council to review and refine the ordinance between 2001 and 2003. I acted as an unofficial scribe at these meetings, formulating many of the concepts and drafting much of the language that eventually became law.

These task forces were broadly representative, encompassing neighborhood groups, environmental organizations, builders, developers, planners and city staff. Our bi-weekly discussions were lengthy and often contentious. Our decisions were made by consensus. We did the best we could given the extreme disparity of represented views and interests.

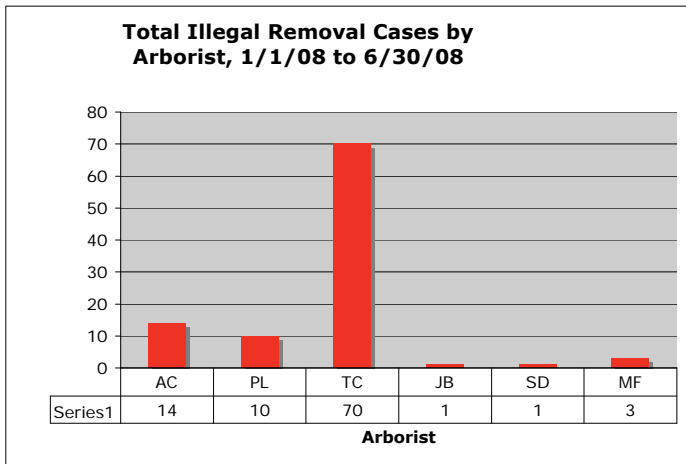
Despite its flaws and weaknesses, I strongly support the ordinance. I have an earned reputation among supporters and detractors alike for close adherence to an impartial administration of the law. Many people have combined their outrage at my firing with their fear that without me the law will fail.

They might be right. As I wrote to Mayor Shirley Franklin and others on July 31, 2008:

*Though I know no specifics of my firing, I do know the context. I have been attempting to address (1) the lack of accountability to the tree protection ordinance expected of my field arborist colleagues in their day-to-day work of hazard tree evaluations and building permit postings, and (2) the near total abdication of enforcement of the tree protection ordinance by my colleagues in the more difficult areas of correction notices on construction sites and the imposition of recompense and penalties for the illegal destruction of trees on either construction sites or private residences.*

I illustrated my concerns with a chart from a productivity analysis I had

performed and given to my supervisor on July 21. One such chart focused on the probable impact of my firing on the level of enforcement of the ordinance in the city:



As this chart shows, in the first six months of this year I initiated over 70% of total illegal removal cases in the city. Considering just the work done by my three subordinates (“PL,” “JB” and “MF”) and me, the figure is even more stunning.

This chart illustrates a third reason for concern over my firing: The sense that the city prefers to waste tax dollars protecting the jobs of unresponsive and unproductive employees while imposing sanctions on its most responsive and productive people, particularly those who also complain of the situation.

My case certainly tends to validate that position, but so do many of the unexamined “RIF” decisions in the Bureau of Buildings mentioned earlier. The uproar over my dismissal in contrast to the silence and indifference faced by equally valuable people “rified” seems to reside in the perception that “budget driven” terminations in the Bureau, even of the best, most productive and outspoken people, is OK, but that “policy driven” terminations like mine, are not.

## Conclusion

Perhaps the best thing that could come from my firing would be an expanded investigation into the choice of people unfairly dismissed in the budget crisis. In

the meantime, I urge the City of Atlanta to adopt and enforce performance metrics for every job function. These standards would set minimum expectations for both productivity and quality of work at all employment levels. If used properly, such standards would help eliminate unfounded and unfair dismissals and add some rationality to retention and layout decisions made in times of economic downturn.

### “When Tom Coffin isn’t in the Field”

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“I just ran out of my house to defend a huge old pine tree in a neighbor’s yard. Apparently these people didn’t think they had to obey the law and get a permit to take down this huge, lovely (and apparently very healthy) pine. I ran out and started questioning the foreign crew of three (in a small pickup truck to remove a 3 1/2 ft. in diameter tree!) to stop. I asked if they had a permit and the man in the tree told me they did (a few minutes later the homeowner admitted that they did not). We were able to stop them but this is proof positive what happens when a Tom Coffin isn’t in the field. I have photos of the man with the chainsaw up the tree (and the perfectly healthy limbs below). I feared he and his crew would drop the tree right on top of our house...and I didn’t want to see another beautiful tree removed from our neighborhood. He hightailed it off the property the minute I told him I was calling “the authorities.”

I’ve seen many healthy trees, unpermitted trees cut down in our neighborhood lately. In one case, I called the City and they told me the homeowner was permitted because the trees were dead. The trees were NOT dead. What’s going on?”

**Kay C.**  
FCTF Member  
Atlanta Homeowner

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**Please EMAIL, CALL or WRITE Mayor Franklin TODAY!**

The Fulton County Taxpayers Foundation would like to thank Tom Coffin for his contribution to our monthly newsletter. His situation demands that a Professional Performance Audit be MANDATORY for all City Employees, cited in the Bain Report Turnaround Plan (<http://fctf.org/media/Bain-Report.pdf>). As of this publication, there have been no attempts by Mayor Franklin's administration to implement this vital piece of accountability that over 70% of cities across the Country boast as part of their employment process.

**We Urge Our Members and Supporters to Contact Mayor Franklin to Demand Professional Performance Standards for All City Employees!**

Please EMAIL, CALL or WRITE Mayor Franklin TODAY!

**[SFranklin@atlantaga.gov](mailto:SFranklin@atlantaga.gov) 404-330-6100**

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**Cordially Invites You To Our Luncheon at 103 West (103 West Paces) at Noon, October 29th, 2008**

**TOM COFFIN**  
*Former Senior Arborist*  
 will speak on His Experiences working with the City of Atlanta



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