

City's trees suffer neglect

■ Salem's tree trimmers have a hard time keeping up with service demands.

By Theresa Novak

The Statesman Journal

Salem is called the Cherry City, and its decadelong status as a Tree City USA is a point of civic pride.

But all that talk is sawdust to Elwood Newhouse.

The owner of Elwood's Tree Service complains that the city doesn't live up to its tree-loving reputation.

City tree protectors don't enforce city regulations that might prevent chainsaw-wielding amateurs from turning poplar into pulp.

Newhouse, who can lead a tour of what he calls Salem's trees of shame, said he has plenty of backing from other tree trimmers, from a state urban forester — and from the city itself.

"Yeah, well, he's right," said Jim Boling, who supervises the city's street tree program.

Boling said it's a simple case of too much work for too few people.

"I've got a four-person crew and more than 65,000 trees. I could hire a tree trimmer right out of high school and have him prune a tree, and he wouldn't get back to it for 40 years," Boling said.

Cutting down hazardous trees and keeping others trimmed away from power lines and buildings tends to consume most of the department's \$276,000 annual budget. Responding to residents' problems is another priority.

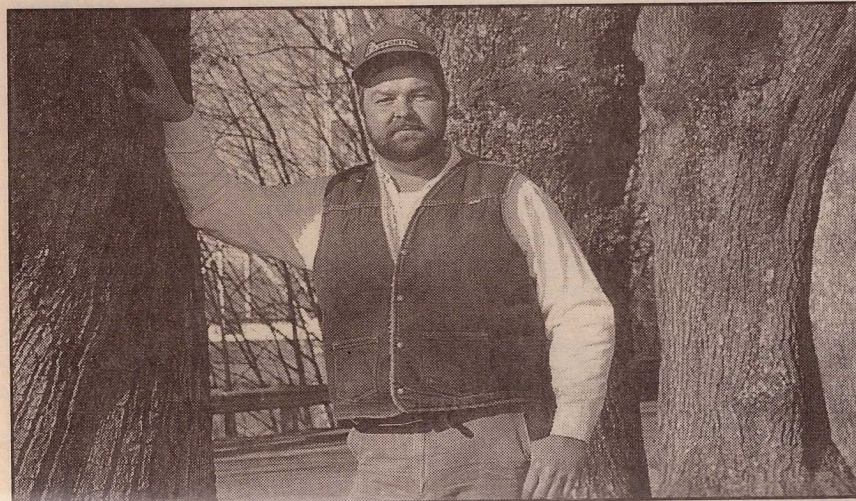
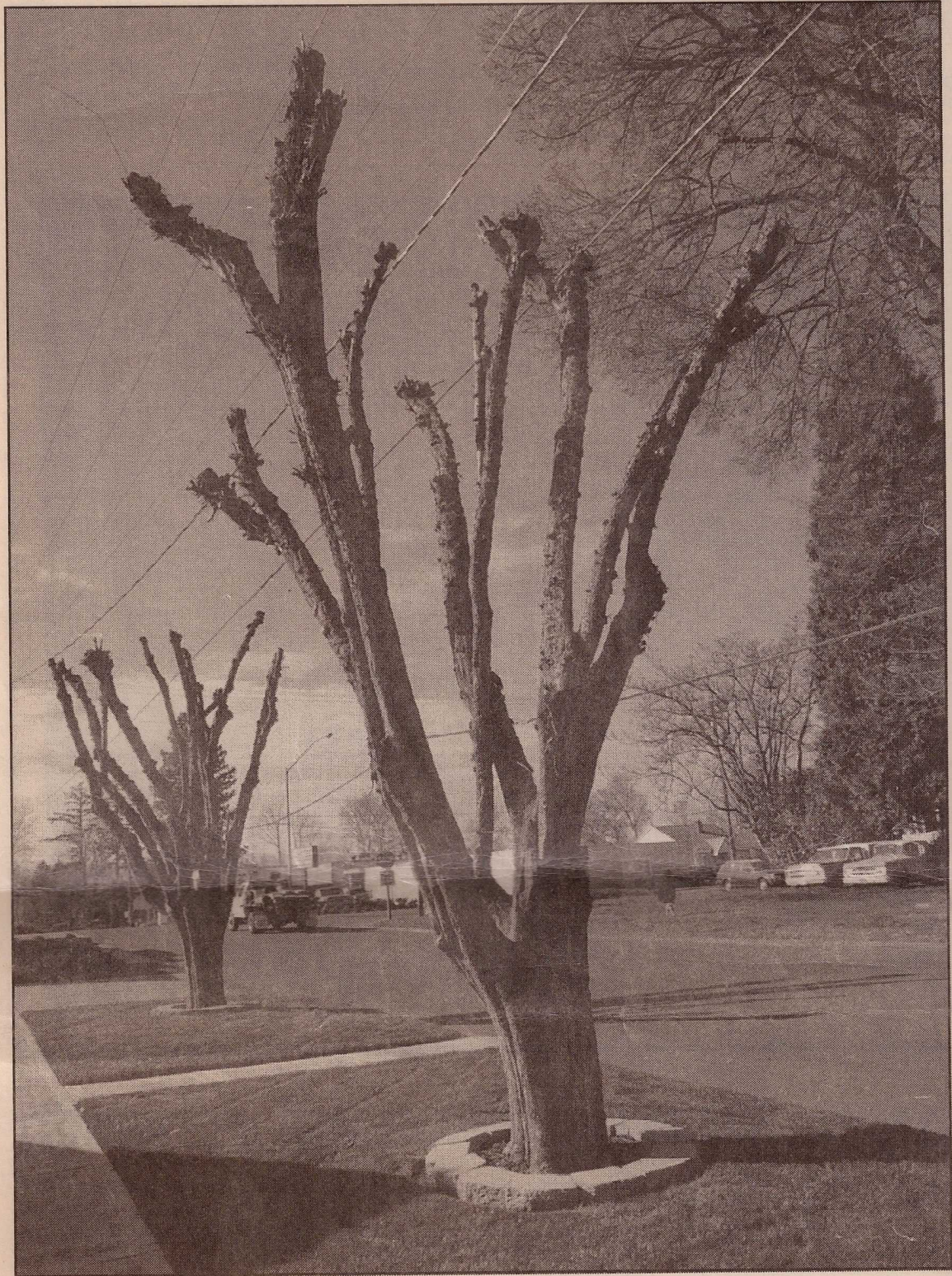
"Unfortunately, what we are stuck with is a complaint-driven system. That is what we respond to, and we are pretty current," Boling said.

Of course, sometimes they fall behind.

Last summer, city tree trimmers were 80 days behind in responding to complaints of dangerous or overgrown trees.

The result is that a carefully planned pruning program takes a back seat to emergency surgery.

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ABOVE: Improper pruning takes its toll on Salem trees. The city's street tree program doesn't have the budget to enforce regulations that might prevent amateurs from chopping up the Cherry City's trees.

LEFT: Elwood Newhouse, owner of Elwood's Tree Service, is stumped as to why city tree protectors aren't doing their jobs.

Stephanie Basalyga/
Statesman Journal

Trees/Improper topping takes toll in health

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Paul Ries, an urban forester for the Oregon Department of Forestry, said the state has noticed examples of trees being cut in odd ways that end up cutting off buds and creating spindly, weak growth.

For instance, Salem's namesake cherry trees along Commercial Street SE were improperly pruned into stumps near a grocery store.

Although Boling said it isn't in the city's right-of-way, Newhouse said it looks as though it is.

Improper pruning takes its toll down the road. For example, seven native maples that now shade the Gilbert Children's Museum on Front Street NE, each more than 100 years old, are about to be taken down because of indiscriminate tree topping. About 30 years ago, the former owners hacked the trees' main branches indiscriminately to reduce their height. Today, the trees are weak and rotted.

The city is removing them March 14.

Things aren't likely to change

much unless one thing happens.

"If people want to see the city start enforcing some of these ordinances against cutting down city's trees and whatnot, they ought to show up at the budget hearings and start asking for the service," says Maynard Dawson, a tree historian and a defender of Oregon's big, old trees.

With other city services also begging for extra dollars, getting more money for tree trimming may be a tall order. Until then, the department is likely

to continue as is — dealing with the most hazardous situations first and answering complaints second.

One thing he definitely won't do, Boling said, is let residents use city tree trimmers to save a little yard work. Inevitably every fall, the demand for cutting down trees increases as people want the city to use a chainsaw so they won't have to use a rake.

"We don't punish trees," Boling said, "for having leaves."