Seattle Urban Forestry Commission

2014 Annual Report

Introduction

In 2014 the Urban Forestry Commission continued to advise the Mayor and City Council on policies, plans, and regulations governing the protection, management, and conservation of trees and vegetation in the City of Seattle. The Commission is a forum for discussion on urban forest concerns and makes recommendations to encourage City decision-making as we recognize the urban forest as a critical piece of Seattle's urban infrastructure.

The Commission's primary objectives for 2014 were:

- To support implementation of the Urban Forest Stewardship Plan's (UFSP) goals.
- To provide advice, feedback and recommendations to the Mayor and City Council on specific policy actions that will ensure the long-term health and viability of Seattle's urban forest; and
- To provide a forum for public dialogue to assist the Commission in its advisory role.

The 2014 Work Plan priority actions included:

* DPD's tree protection on private property ordinance;
* Internal engagement of City departments on canopy goals;
* Outreach and engagement;
* Advising on City decisions that impact the 30% canopy cover goal; and
* Improving transparency or process and operations of the Commission.

2014 Accomplishments

2014 was the most productive year yet with over 15 advisory letters issued on topics in support of Seattle's urban forestry goals. Topics discussed and acted on included:

Tree Preservation on Public Property

Executive Order 03-05 – Tree Replacement

In 2005, then Mayor Nickels issued an Executive Order directing City departments to replace every tree removed from City property with two new trees. The Commission commended City departments for doing a very good job addressing this requirement; however, mature tree removal is often being replaced with smaller canopy species which, meeting the stated requirement of the Two-for-One order, has a negative effect in our overall canopy cover.

The Commission recommended simple modifications to the Executive Order to better support the UFSP's goals including:

* Tree removals required to be replaced with 2:1 of medium to large canopy trees at maturity, or if small trees are required due to space constraints then the replacement should be 4:1
* Conifers should be replaced with conifers at the appropriate ratio; and
* Minimum tree planting size should be reduced to 1 inch caliper. This size has several benefits including survivability, ease of placement, and ease of handling, adaptation, and cost. Generally the smaller caliper trees will grow more quickly and surpass the trees planted at a larger size.

Revised Use Policy for Seattle's Natural Areas and Greenbelts

Seattle's natural areas and greenbelts are an important element of Seattle's broader city-wide 30 percent canopy cover goal as stated in the Urban Forest Stewardship Plan. With the Parks Department gearing up to revise its permanent use policy for Seattle's natural areas and greenbelts, the Commission requested its involvement on the citizen committee through-out the policy development process.

Cheasty Mountain Bike Pilot Project

The Seattle Parks Board made the decision to incorporate a mountain bike trail pilot project in the Cheasty Greenspace on the east slope of Beacon Hill in South Seattle. The Commission received a number of letters of concern and public comment from neighbors and other stakeholders and a presentation by Parks.

The Commission issued a letter making recommendations specific to the pilot proposal including that any mountain bike trail be on the perimeter of the green space; that the interior habitat area be kept intact with no bike or pedestrian cross trails or meeting places; placement of a wildlife permeable fence on the interior side of the bike trail to stop bikes from entering the interior of the green space while allowing wildlife to pass through; completion of a baseline for wildlife and plants before trail use beings; extend four data collection of impacts and changes to at least five years, consistent with similar regulatory protocols; that any volunteer mountain bike trail work be done in conjunction with comparable restoration work being completed on habitat restoration of the green space; a long term memorandum of understanding (MOU) be reached with bike trail proponents regarding construction costs, volunteer work, habitat restoration efforts, and trail maintenance; a goal of no net loss of habitat should be stated as part of the MOU; and a competitive obstacle course should not be added to the project.

This pilot project is still in the early phases and the Commission has committed to continue to track both the restoration effort and the bike trail effort.

Seattle City Light Disposition of Surplus Stations

Seattle City Light staff briefed the Chair on the disposition of properties and clean up strategies in early 2014. Concerned community members then brought to the Commission's attention the removal of mature trees from Seattle City Light surplus sub-station properties that are in the disposition process. The Commission received a briefing on the legal constraints for properties owned by utilities. The Commission issued a letter recognizing that process was followed and encouraging the City in the future to find creative ways to preserve mature trees while

accommodating other City priorities as a key strategy to accomplish our canopy cover goals.

Tree Preservation on Private Property

DPD Tree Ordinance

The Commission continues to urge the City to resume work on legislation

initially proposed during the Commission's 2009 inaugural year to establish a comprehensive set of regulations and incentives to limit the removal of trees and promote the retention and addition of trees on private property. The Commission believes the lack of clear guidance is affecting development time due to uncertainty of the application and interpretation of current code and director's rule.

Seattle Times Park

Community groups were concerned that with the recent sale of the Seattle Times property, the open space known as Seattle Times Parks was in danger of being lost to development.

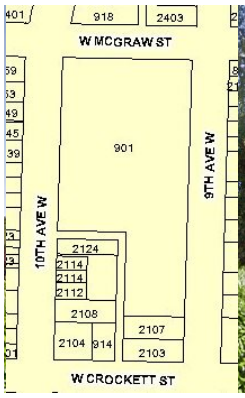
The Commission issued a letter encouraging the City to find creative ways to preserve mature trees while accommodating competing uses such as development. The letter provided several ideas to preserve the over a quarter of an acre of continuous canopy provided by the site's mature trees. The letter emphasized the importance of open space and tree canopy in the downtown zone which has a goal of 12 percent canopy cover and is currently at about 7 percent.

Photo: mSeattle via Flickr

A Commission member read the letter as part of several comments at the Design Review Board meeting which resulted in a revised plan that saved the key trees and met development interests.

Queen Anne Children's Home property

This 2.5 acre parcel has over 80 mature trees, 47 of which are exceptional. A community group reached out to the Commission seeking guidance and support to ensure that decisions for this development are made with full review of Seattle goals and policies for trees and vegetation.

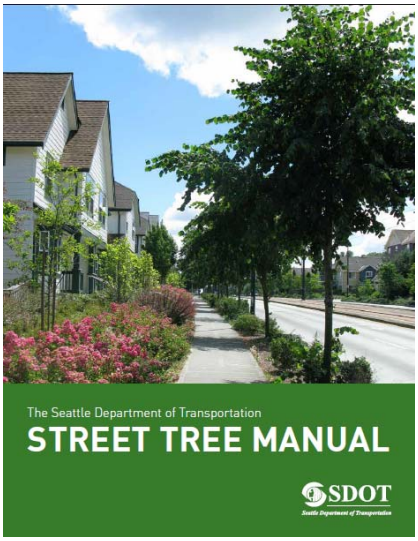


The Commission issued a letter requesting a balanced review of departures from code and considerations given the applicant's request to remove several exceptional trees from the site as well as emphasizing the importance of use of best management practices for tree protection during development.

Right-of-Way Tree Preservation

Street Tree Manual

The Commission provided comments and recommendations as part of SDOT's public comment period.



The Street Tree Manual provides comprehensive guidance for residents, developers, contractors, and arborists. The Commission commended SDOT for developing an exceptional manual for the management of Seattle's street trees.

Avenue of Street Trees

The Commission issued a letter commending SDOT's efforts to encourage planting trees along Seattle streets. The Commission suggested SDOT create 'street tree corridor arboretums' along arterials in two to four areas of the city. By planting a row of selected SDOT approved street trees with identification signs that people can read, residents would be encouraged to plant street trees and better understand canopy value.

Tree Grates on Downtown Street Trees

The Commission issued a letter requesting immediate funding and action to retrofit the tree grates from our downtown trees. Tree grates are designed to be cut out as the trunk grows but this action rarely occurs and Seattle's downtown trees are getting strangled.

The Commission recommended SDOT to put together a crew to review each street tree grate downtown, retrofit grates within 5" of tree trunks, and produce a tree grate inventory and database for future proactive and scheduled maintenance. The Commission is aware that many of these downtown trees are technically the responsibility of the adjacent property owner, but believe these trees cannot wait for the 'complaint' process to take place. Once the necessary retrofits take place, SDOT could seek partnerships to implement ongoing tree grate management.

Urban Forestry Funding

Seattle Metropolitan Parks District

Seattle's urban forest represents a long-term investment in green infrastructure and our quality of life. By creating a stable and reliable funding source, the Seattle Parks District will enable the City to manage and plan for the long-term rather than being tied to the uncertainty of recurring levies. Continuing the cycle of deferred maintenance threatens the health of our natural areas and will result in significant canopy cover loss and increased costs over the long term. The Commission discussed the pros and cons of this measure and voted to support allowing voters to decide.

The Commission sent a letter of recommendation for City Council to put the Metropolitan Parks District on the August 5, 2014 ballot. This measure was passed.

Carbon Market

The Commission sees opportunities for funding urban forestry through the creation of tree planting and canopy protocols that might allow

California businesses to purchase carbon offsets coming from Seattle. The Commission will follow development in Washington State and continue to engage in finding urban forestry opportunities in the Carbon market.

Urban Forestry Commission/Urban Forest Inter-departmental Team Joint Meeting

The Commission and the Urban Forest Inter-departmental Team had their 2014 extended work session at Camp Long. The goal of the meeting this year was to strengthen the partnership between the groups in order to accomplish the goals of the Urban Forest Stewardship Plan. To that end, the primary focus of the annual meeting was the 4H Challenge Course, a team-building exercise lead by facilitators from Camp Long.

The meeting concluded with a visit to the future site of the Urban Forestry Commission Grove at Camp Long.

Race and Social Justice

After participating in the 2013 race and social justice training, the Commission continued to inquire on the race and social justice aspects of its work and how to best engage Seattle's diverse population. As a result of this inquiry and the partnership with Councilmember Sally Bagshaw, the Commission proposed amending the ordinance that created the Commission to add a tenth position to its membership. The new position will be occupied by a Get

Engaged young adult, to both encourage young adults to participate and to contribute to the Commission's diversity.

Commission Changes

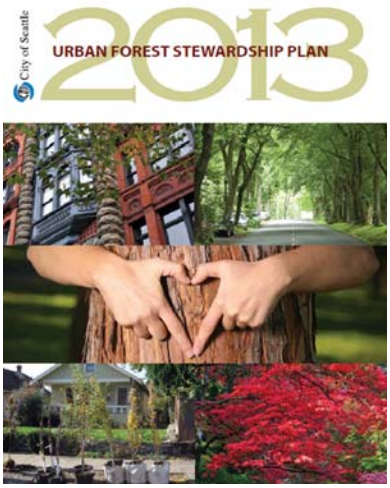
Three new members joined the Urban Forestry Commission in 2014: Steve Zemke (Position 1 - Wildlife Biologist), Donna Kostka (Position 2 - Urban Ecologist), and Joanna Nelson de Flores (Position # 7 - NGO Representative). Peg Staeheli's second term ends in 2014. Recruitment for her position (Position #4 - Hydrologist) is currently under way. Commissioners Leif Fixen (Position # 5 - Arborist) and Tom Early (Position # 6 - Landscape Architect) were re-appointed to second three-year terms. Leif Fixen will be chair in 2015 and Tom Early vice chair.

Conclusion

The Commission's first six years involved extensive organizational development.

The Commission has worked to support and frame the goals and policies of the City. The original impetus for the Commission came out of a concern for tree protection and interim guidance through a blue ribbon commission.

The Commission is pleased to have supported the application of the 2007 Urban Forest Management Plan and the update with the adopted 2013 Urban Forest Stewardship Plan. The Commission is also pleased to have participated in SDOT's Tree Ordinance and their development of the Street Tree Manual.



Most importantly, the Commission is pleased to have continued to build rapport with the members of the City's Urban Forest IDT by identifying shared goals and ideals, and recognized the complexities of managing Seattle's urban forest, and to have provided a forum for discussions of the values and concerns for trees, vegetation, and habitat in Seattle.

Next Steps

The Commission wants to focus energy on obtaining support for a robust DPD tree ordinance for protection of trees on private property. Other efforts include :

* Review of the SDOT's Tree and Sidewalk Operations Plan;
* SDOT's Right-of-Way Improvement Manual update;
* DPD's Comprehensive Plan update;
* OSE's Monitoring Framework for the Urban Forest Stewardship Plan; and
* Parks' Revised Permanent Use Policy for Natural Areas and Green Spaces.

Contact:

Additional information about the Urban Forestry Commission can be found at: www.seattle.gov/urbanforestrycommission/, or by contacting:

Sandra Pinto de Bader
Coordinator, Urban Forestry Commission
Seattle Office of Sustainability & Environment
P.O. Box 94729
Seattle, WA 98124-4649
Sandra.Pinto_de_Bader@seattle.gov
(206) 684-3194

2014 Urban Forestry Commission

Peg Staeheli, Chair
Hydrologist —Position #4

Tom Early, Vice-chair
Landscape Architect—Position #6

Steve Zemke
Wildlife Biologist—Position #1

Donna Kostka
Urban Ecologist —Position #2

Gordon Bradley
University Representative —Position #3

Leif Fixen
Arborist —Position #5

Joanna Nelson de Flores
NGO Representative—Position #7

Jeff Reibman
Development Community —Position #8

Erik Rundell
Economist/Financial Analyst —Position #9