

Seattle Urban Forestry Commission

2016 Annual Report

Introduction

The Urban Forestry Commission (UFC) celebrated its seventh year and continued to fulfill its mandate to advise the Mayor and City Council on policies and regulations governing the protection, management, and conservation of trees and vegetation in the City of Seattle. The UFC made recommendations to encourage City decision-making to recognize the urban forest as a critical piece of our urban infrastructure.

The UFC's primary objectives are:

- To support implementation of the Urban Forest Stewardship Plan's goals:
 1. Create an ethic of stewardship for the urban forest among City staff, community organizations, businesses, and residents.
 2. Strive to replace trees and enhance specific urban forest functions and benefits when trees are lost, and achieve a net increase in the urban forest functions and related environmental, economic, and social benefits.
 3. Expand canopy cover to 30 percent by 2037.
 4. Increase health and longevity of the urban forest by removing invasive species and improving species and age diversity.
- To provide feedback and recommendations to City Council and the Mayor 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.

2016 Accomplishments

This year, the UFC went a step further to better understand the City's urban forestry work. It requested budget briefings coupled with guided tours that exemplify the complex issues faced by City departments tasked with supporting Seattle's urban forest. Throughout the year, the UFC had the opportunity to see on-the-ground challenging situations and celebrate projects that have taken advantage of opportunities to enhance this valuable resource.

The UFC issued several letters of recommendation including:

[Seattle's Draft Environmental Critical Area Update and Revised Great Blue Heron Director's Rule 5-2007.](#)

The UFC recommended making using the Seattle Municipal Code and the Environmental Critical Areas portion user-friendly by improving readability, adding a table of contents and an index. The UFC also recommended adding a new requirement that, before receiving a certificate of occupancy from the City, landowners should demonstrate that they have maintained habitat and removed invasive plants in critical areas and critical area buffers. Regarding the revised Great Blue Heron Director's Rule 5-2007, the UFC recommended incorporating recommendations made by the UFC in 2010 regarding nesting habitat protection, including providing year-around protection, include protection of eggs, ensure the seasonal zone is 500' throughout the city, etc.

Right-of-Way Improvements Manual Update.

A Commissioner participated in the planning process for the ROWIM update and the UFC issued two letters of recommendation emphasizing the importance of requiring appropriate soil volume by establishing 1,200 cubic feet of soil volume as part of the general street tree design standards.

Major Institutions Master Plans.

The UFC made suggestions for future updates to the Seattle Major Institutions Master Plans to increase consideration of the urban forest and offset tree canopy losses managed by Seattle's major institutions. UFC suggestions included: 1) emphasizing that new building setbacks could help retain existing trees and provide space for planting new trees; 2) restoring tree canopy can mitigate adverse impacts caused by development; 3) include a 1:1 tree replacement ratio of equivalent sized trees at maturity; 4) add specificity to existing thresholds by stating that existing open areas would not be reduced by more than 4,000 square feet or remove three or more non-hazardous significant trees; 5) include off-site planting or fee in lieu to Trees for Neighborhoods program as an option when planting space is not available on site; and 6) stating that evergreen trees should be replaced with evergreen trees.

Opening Parks property to homeless encampments

The UFC acknowledges that homelessness is a complex issue that impacts not only those experiencing it but the whole community. The UFC opposed opening Parks property to encampments stating that camping in Parks land not only doesn't provide the necessary services and support people need, it also has significant impacts on the urban forest. The UFC specifically mentioned the more than 11 years of community-based restoration efforts under the Green Seattle Partnership, which, since 2005 has garnered over 850,000 volunteer hours and invested millions of dollars in City funding to restore our forested parkland and natural areas. Homeless encampments have already had a significant demoralizing effect on hundreds of residents and visiting volunteers who have been working tirelessly to restore Seattle's forested parklands. The UFC advised City Council to postpone voting on such an important issue until an opportunity for all stakeholders to weigh-in is provided; there is a better understanding of the impacts on our urban forests; and a diverse set of potential solutions that meet the urgent needs of both the homeless and protecting our urban forests and parks is duly evaluated.

Backyard Cottages and Accessory Dwelling Units proposed ordinance

The UFC believes the proposed change to remove off-street parking requirements should help reduce impervious surface and provide more flexibility in maintaining and increasing trees and greenery when backyard cottages or Accessory Dwelling Units are built. However, in some instances trees will be cut down to accommodate these structures. The UFC proposed including mitigation for tree loss in the shape of tree replacement requirements or payment in-lieu.

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

The Commission and the Urban Forest Inter-departmental Team had their sixth 2016 annual meeting at Camp Long. The meeting focused on urban forestry and equity. The goals of the meeting were:

- Strengthening the partnership between the Urban Forestry Commission and the Urban Forest Interdepartmental Team to accomplish the goals of the Urban Forest Stewardship Plan.
- Create a learning environment for the group to apply the Equity and Environment Agenda's goals to our urban forestry work.

The group was introduced to the Equity and Environment Agenda's goals and did an exercise to incorporate equity outcomes to urban forestry efforts.

Commission Membership

Three new members joined the Urban Forestry Commission in 2016: Weston Brinkley (Position#3 - Natural Resource Agency or University Representative), Andrew Zellers (Position #8 - Development Community or Utility Representative), and Reid Haefer (Get Engaged Position). Steve Zemke (Position#1 - Wildlife Biologist) and Donna Kostka (Position #2 - Urban Ecologist) were re-appointed to a second term. Erik Rundell (Position #9 - Economist, Financial Analyst, Realtor, or similar profession) finished his second term. Due to unforeseen circumstances Richard Martin (Position #4 - Hydrologist or similar professional) will not be able to finish his term. The recruitment for both positions #4 and #9 are currently underway. Tom Early was elected chair for 2017 with Steve Zemke serving as vice-chair.

Conclusion

The Commission has worked to support updates of City policies with a keen eye toward enhancing the urban forest. Focusing on details which improve the urban forest like providing soil volume for trees to mature and recommending that re-development sites are cleared of noxious weeds are two highlights from this year's suggestions to the Mayor and City Council.

The Commission was pleased with hosting budget discussions and going on site tours which highlighted the challenges that the City's Urban Forest Inter-departmental Team regularly encounters. These discussions and tours not only illuminated the Commission to intricacies and nuances of urban forestry policy and procedures in Seattle but they also continued to build rapport between the Commission and the Inter-departmental Team.

The Commission is looking forward to the results of an updated tree canopy assessment. This assessment will allow for a second point to determine how the urban forest canopy coverage is changing since the last assessment in 2007. An updated canopy coverage assessment will aid in the 2018 update to the Urban Forest Stewardship Plan as well as refinement of the City's tree codes.

2016 Commission Members:

Tom Early, Chair: Landscape Architect—Position #6
Steve Zemke, Vice-chair: Wildlife Biologist—Position #1
Donna Kostka: Urban Ecologist —Position #2
Weston Brinkley: University Representative (Antioch University)—Position #3
Richard Martin, Chair: Hydrologist —Position #4
Leif Fixen: Arborist —Position #5
Joanna Nelson de Flores: NGO Representative—Position #7
Andrew Zellers: Development Community Representative —Position #8
Erik Rundell: Planner—Position #9
Reid Haefer: Get Engaged Position #10

Contact:

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

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