

SEATTLE URBAN FORESTRY COMMISSION

Tom Early, Chair • Steve Zemke, Vice-Chair
Weston Brinkley • Leif Fixen • Reid Haefer • Donna Kostka • Richard Martin • Joanna Nelson de Flores
Erik Rundell • Andrew Zellers

The Urban Forestry Commission was established to advise the Mayor and City Council concerning the establishment of policy and regulations governing the protection, management, and conservation of trees and vegetation in the City of Seattle

November 9, 2016

Meeting Notes

Seattle Municipal Tower, Room 2750 (27th floor)
700 5th Avenue, Seattle

Attending

Commissioners

Tom Early – chair
Steve Zemke – vice-chair
Weston Brinkley
Reid Haefer
Joanna Nelson de Flores
Erik Rundell

Staff

Sandra Pinto de Bader - OSE
Tracy Morgenstern – OSE
Brent Schmidt - SCL
David Bayard - SCL

Public

Lance Young – Shoreline resident
Janet Way – Shoreline resident
Anne Prezym – Shoreline resident
Tina Cohen – Shoreline resident
Boni Biery – Shoreline resident

Absent- Excused

Richard Martin
Andrew Zellers
Donna Kostka
Leif Fixen

NOTE: Meeting notes are not exhaustive. For more details listen to the digital recording of the meeting at: <http://www.seattle.gov/urbanforestrycommission/meetingdocs.htm>

Call to order

Tom called the meeting to order and read the agenda.

Public comment

Lance Young – brought additional questions for SCL regarding their response to his letter.

Janet Way – would like to ask SCL to honor their community values to honor trees. The value they place on trees should be upheld by SCL. When trimming so heavily impacts trees, it’s not acceptable. In Shoreline, huge rezones have been put in place for light rail stations and they are going to be losing lots of trees. The total impact is significant. Need to find ways to preserve trees.

Anne Prezym – submitted a two-page comment letter reiterating what the UFC heard today about excessive pruning, where trees become hazardous and need to be removed due to excessive pruning. Looked at the revised code of Washington. She didn’t see in her review that these pruning distances are required. She hopes SCL will consider for future pruning efforts to preserve trees.

Adoption of October 5 and October 12 meeting notes

ACTION: A motion to approve the October 5 meeting notes as amended was made, seconded, and approved.

ACTION: A motion to approve the October 12 meeting notes as amended was made, seconded, and approved.

Draft Climate Preparedness Strategy

Tracy Morgenstern shared the climate preparedness strategy. The Commission provided input to the Climate Action Plan. The preparedness piece was not fully developed and now she would like to get input on the preparedness strategy.

As part of climate change, we expect changes in temperature, precipitation and higher sea levels. Climate change affects people differently. There are communities that will be more adversely affected. Lower income people are especially vulnerable. Vulnerability factors include racism, income, living conditions, age, location, occupation, health, and language barriers.

Planning priorities include:

- Equity: prioritize actions that reduce risk and enhance resilience for communities with disproportionate climate risk.
- Co-benefits: design and implement resilience strategies that advance community goals.
- Natural systems: use nature-based solutions that leverage ecosystem services and foster natural systems resilience.

Citywide actions:

- Provide sea level rise guidance for capital projects
- Equitable climate preparedness planning and evaluation tool
 - o Strategies
 - o Community driven planning

The team talked to different sectors including: transportation, land use & building environment, City buildings, parks, drainage and water supply, electricity, and community preparedness. The last chapter of the strategy provides ideas of what people can do.

Urban Forestry Impacts:

- A concern is increase in tree stress and mortality to drought, insects, disease and storm events.
- Downed limbs and trees related to extreme precipitation and storms.

Urban Forestry implications:

- Longer watering and plant establishment periods
- Storm-related tree damage and related road closures and response costs
- Increased maintenance to reduce risk of blowdown or limb breakage
- Increased maintenance to respond to fallen branches and dead tree removal.
- Sidewalk damage due to drought stress.

Urban Forestry Actions:

- Tree selection
- Ecosystem services
 - o Mitigate heat islands
 - o Buffer pollution
 - o Mitigate storm surge
- Improve maintenance
 - o Increase establishment period
 - o Increase watering season
- Increase community support

Equity goals:

Reduce disproportionate climate risk and help ensure that the benefits and burdens of preparedness strategies are equitably shared:

- Prioritize actions that help communities of color and lower income communities moderate potential impacts and cope with the consequences of climate change
- Empower frontline communities as leaders in the planning process

Equity actions:

- Develop an equitable climate preparedness planning tool to help:
 - o Identify who is benefiting/burdened by climate change and adaptation strategies
 - o Identify equitable adaptation strategies that function at the root causes of disproportionate vulnerability
 - o Conduct community-driven planning
- Prioritize designate Equity and Environment Initiative focused areas and populations
- Design planning processes to include community as partners, sharing decision-making power
- Foster social cohesion, a key factor in community resilience, through engagement and planning processes.

UFC question: has there been a geographical analysis of where trees and where are the most vulnerable?

How did you look at sea level rise? What's the magnitude of the impact?

Answer: we have a separate document that looks at sea-level rise impacts with different time horizons. They have compared that to different infrastructure assets. They have very good mapping and they are available on SPU's website. Most impact is in the lower Duwamish valley.

UFC question: regarding tree selection, how does heavier winter rain levels affect tree selection?

Answer: in SPU over 2017 and into 2018 will be doing a much more detail with stormwater effects. They are looking at how they can maximize the benefits of trees.

UFC question: how does tree selection dovetail into the incoming pests and diseases that the Pacific NW is expecting to receive as they move across the US.

Answer: departments have been looking at those issues. Parks has been doing succession planning.

UFC question: Can you talk about the planning and evaluation tool?

Answer: the tool helps staff ask questions about challenges before planning work begins. They also look at the demographics of who is in the room to make decisions, how they are using scientific data. The tool asks a lot of questions and has check boxes to guide the planning process. It also looks at specific strategies that can be used. Working with youth and creating job opportunities, etc. She could share the first iteration of the tool if the Commission would like.

Tracy will send the tool to Sandra to distribute to the UFC. They will be bringing the Equity and Environment Agenda to the tool. It's similar to the City's Race and Equity Toolkit. Urban forestry and trees have been identified as a key component to the preparedness strategy.

UFC question: were trees and natural systems something you heard from the communities you engaged or did it come from the city staff?

Answer: Both. They heard about it as part of the Climate Action Plan, it's a City priority and have seen it as an opportunity worldwide.

UFC question: are the cities you are working with acknowledged?

Answer: they are cities part of an organization that provides grants. Toronto, DC, Fort Lauderdale, and Baltimore (co-lead). Observer cities include Portland and San Francisco. Would like to receive comments by November 30.

SCL response to Lance Young's letter

Brent brought a map showing how SCL prunes by feeder. They have been scheduled on a 4-year cycle and will be going to 5-year cycle next year due to budget.

Brent walked the Commission through the briefing document answering Mr. Young's questions. Most of the staff are ISA certified arborists. After trimming is done they leave a card with a survey to get feedback from residents.

Utilities set up their own clearance distances, based on voltages of the systems. SCL's system is higher than any of the surrounding utilities, it is also a function of budget and reliability standards expected by residents. Historically didn't do a good job of pruning trees and it wasn't until Hanukah eve storm that they decided to get on a 4-year cycle. They are dealing with a system that has large, inappropriate species planted right under the wires. Portland is a smaller KV system. They tend to disguise their pruning by doing rounding and shaping that makes the trees look to the uneducated eye like a better pruning job but they remove much more of the tree. Snohomish PU District operates a 12.5 kv system with a similar pruning cycle. SCL doesn't prune for communications wires. Earlier in the year when he took the UFC on a tour they showed the Commission some of the challenging areas that had been pruned two years back and the trees were growing back onto the wires. Council focuses on reliability.

UFC Question: it's important for this notice to get to the property owner. If the renter ignores it, it doesn't get to the owner.

Answer: not yet.

Second question:

Distribution clearances have not been increased. The contract language regarding tree trimming – clearing requirements and methods. SCL has standards done in 2006. Some have to do with deciduous trees and some with conifers. It is their goal to maintain 10ft clearances. They are living systems that grow at different rates.

The Transmission Vegetation Management System is directed to SCL's transmission system. It is not applicable or relevant to the electrical distribution system work. SCL has federal mandates to maintain clearance around transmission corridors at higher levels than distribution corridors. Lance asked about the 10ft clearance. It's the objective to maintain it to avoid conflict although it's probably not realistic.

UFC question/comment: will they give a new specification when they move from 4 to 5 year cycles?
Is it up to the person doing the pruning?

Answer: they are still struggling with how they are going to manage going from 4 to 5 year cycles. They have to look at the structure of the tree to figure out what's the best location to cut. There are other elements to take into consideration.

UFC question/comment: do they give guidance based on different tree species. Do you check?

Answer: yes, after the work is done they do an audit and provide feedback.

UFC question/comment: the crew lead is trying to balance the need to perform the work in a given amount of time and cutting back enough to comply with the clearance. May of those crews have many years of experience and know growth patterns of trees in the area.

Answer: if the trees are watered they tend to grow faster.

UFC question/comment: how do you determine how much to trim?

Answer: it depends on the site and the tree species. They have certain feeders that have more pressure to have more reliability (such as around First Hill hospitals). If the system has one circuit it needs a different clearance than when there are three wires.

SCL has an hour-long meeting every Thursday to manage the work. They meet with the contractors every week to go through the audits and anything that needs to be changed and feedback they are getting is communicated weekly. They have an extra hour meeting with notifiers every month to provide them with training to continue their certification. They have done analysis and created picture books with the most common street trees in the city. They have a constant dialogue. Annually, as part of their TreeLine USA certification, they go over the AINSI industry standards with people doing the work.

The contracts are tightly managed. They are helping manage the work and the quality of the work. Every crew is required to have a certified arborist and do a 100% audit on all trees pruned. They are trying to create an ethic of quality for working in Seattle (other utilities don't have this level of commitment and care). They have weeded out those people that are not interested in getting certified and take the time to provide high-quality pruning.

Tom: to recap

- Question of why or where the pruning cycles are coming from reviewing code: Tom's take is that the code give utilities the ability to set the distances. Answer: the electrical code says 10 ft.
- Observing and respecting trees in that the city codes are being respected as well: When you are operating in other cities, are there city codes other than saying that after certain amount of pruning it is considered a tree removal. Answer: they have agreements with cities.
- Lance mentioned question regarding side pruning and other pruning regarding SNO-PUD. They do trim back to the trunk with conifers, because that's the best way of pruning conifers (they deal with that type of cut better).

UFC question/comment: do you have any problems with other cities?

Answer: it depends on how many outages they have. Lake Forest Park have many concerns around trees.

Dave quoted from the SNO-PUD contract which shows that they prune 12 ft. The assertion that SCL prunes 2-3 times more than SNO-PUD is not true.

UFC question/comment: going from 4 to 5-year cycle. Have you quantified the impact on canopy?

Answer: we have not yet quantified that. SCL will likely have to use more the crew that deals with cycle-buster trees that need attention. There expect to have many more cycle-buster trees. The most important thing is consistency. They have already established the architecture they want on the trees. Changing budgets which affect pruning cycles are certainly detrimental to the urban forest.

UFC question/comment: have you seen efficiencies from using the same qualifies group of contractors?

Answer: yes. Mostly the local companies figure out what SCL wants to do and trained their people proactively. They don't have as many 'go-backs' (which SCL doesn't pay for) because they have the incentive to do the job right. The feedback they are getting is positive. The number of complaints is minimal (25 complaints out of 1,200 calls/year).

Tom: Will look into a letter to make Council aware of the issue around longer pruning cycles.

Backyard Cottage/DADU discussion ad possible vote

Erik walked the Commission through the letter. The UFC discussed the letter.

ACTION: A motion to approve the letter as amended was made, seconded, and approved.

Public comment:

Boni – lives in Shoreline. Has been a long advocate of trees. It's important when we talk about SCL to remember that they are a public utility and we are talking about assets that belong to the city. The climate preparedness seems to talk about importance of trees. She would like to ask questions of SCL: SCL is saying they have 1,700 miles of ROW. How many trees are there now? How many trees were there before the storm? How many have been removed, how many have been replaced? By species. The functional part of trees is tied to leaf surface area of trees. She would like to get numbers. What are they doing to protect our assets at a time when we are trying to protect them, now remove them.

Lance: needs to rebut statements about SCL. Centralia guidelines have an 8-year pruning cycle. Tacoma specifies 50kv and trim out to 10 ft.

Janet – understands SCL has responsibility for safety. There are a couple of conflicts with the climate change discussion and the importance the city gives to protecting canopy. There is a conflict in city policy. They are equally important values. Would like the UFC to write a letter and include those values. The total value of an area covered by street trees is greater than any other area of the city. Agrees with Steve about needing to protect exceptional trees.

Anne – encourages the UFC to go on record with City Council and Mayor's Office about how SCL is affecting the urban canopy. She's seen trees pruned excessively and then removed as hazardous trees. Would be nice to have accountability of the impact to the UF.

Steve requested photo documentation.

New Business:

Green Seattle Day is Saturday.

Steve attended the event to recognize commissions. He talked to the Mayor about the letter the UFC sent opposing allowing homeless encampments in parks. The Mayor was grateful to the UFC on their support.

Adjourn

Public input:

-----Original Message-----

From: Lance Young [mailto:lance_young@yahoo.com]
Sent: Wednesday, November 09, 2016 7:31 AM
To: Pinto de Bader, Sandra <Sandra.Pinto_de_Bader@Seattle.gov>
Subject: Right of Way Tree Preservation

Hi Sandra

Would you please forward this email along to the commission members for me. Sorry I did not get this done until this morning but I just got a chance to read the SCL briefing yesterday. For fairness this should also probably be sent to SCL or at least posted.

Thanks!

Lance Young

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To: Urban Forestry Commission
Re: Right of Way Tree Preservation

Follow up questions for SCL at today's meeting:

The beginning of Seattle City Light's (SCL) letter/briefing to the Seattle Urban Forestry Commission lists the significant number of miles of power lines that SCL manages, and emphasizes how cryptically important it is to our region that this is done well with a good balance between power production and forest canopy preservation. To eliminate all trees just for reliability does not make sense since just as doing no pruning at all does not.

The SCL Briefing raises several follow up questions:

1. First is the 10' clearance they keep discussing the Pre-Trim distance, or what they like to maintain for the entire 4 year trimming cycle, or is it the Post-Trim distance that they ask their pruners to obtain after the job is done? It of course can not be both as trees do grow back during the 4 years between pruning cycles.
 - a. If it is the Pre-Trim distance this would correlate with the information provided by SCL at the October 7th 2015 Urban Forestry Meeting, and on their web site <http://www.seattle.gov/light/vegmgmt/treertrim.htm>.
 - b. If it is the Post-Trim distance than this would correlate with the contract wording for their pruning crews (Kemp West, Davey, and Asplund) and with my understanding of their poorly worded "D9-80" Tree Clearance guideline. It would also more closely correlate with other Power Utility's in our region.
2. In their Briefing's explanation of why they differ so much from Snohomish PUD they are not comparing apples to apples. Because SCL does not do any maintenance for the telephone wires under the power lines and Snohomish does. So the better clearance comparison is the side Pre-Trim clearance which for Snohomish is 4' and for SCL is evidently 10'. Why are they so much greater?
3. In the last paragraph of SCL's briefing they say that the "FERC/NERC (Federal Energy Regulatory Commission/N.American Electric Reliability Corp.) have no relevance to distribution line clearance work. I do not understand how they can say this when these agencies do the definitive scientific research on vegetating to line clearances. How can this be of no relevance?
4. SCL's lower power outage rates that they keep mentioning may be a sign of the fact that we have so little forest canopy left in the city and that the balance mentioned above may need to be looked at or adjusted.

From: Morgenstern, Tracy

Sent: Wednesday, November 09, 2016 3:51 PM

To: Pinto de Bader, Sandra <Sandra.Pinto_de_Bader@Seattle.gov>

Subject: Links for UFC

Hi Sandra,

Thank you for the opportunity to talk with the Commission. The links I mentioned are:

Coastal flood risk mapping study: <http://www.seattle.gov/environment/climate-change/planning-for-climate-impacts>

Equity Evaluation: http://usdn.org/uploads/cms/documents/heat_sceanrio_racial_equity_evaluation_mini-report_-_final.pdf (see lessons learned for the work that is evolving into the tool)

Please let me know if I missed something I had promised!

Cheers,

Trace

PlantAmnesty▲▲▲

November, 2016

To whom it may concern,

As a long time defender of City Light's utility pruning practices, it is with a certain amount of regret that I am write to say that the current state of pruning is unnecessarily damaging and should be changed.

Most of the cuts done for the powerlines by Seattle City Light are directional cuts, as required in utility line clearance standards and manuals. However, the problem is that the cuts are too large, there are too many, and they are unnecessary to achieve sufficient line clearance. The ill-effects can be seen. The number and growth rate of epicormic shoots (the watersprouts) increase in response to this severe pruning. They will threaten powerlines in the near future, requiring repeat pruning as they are capable of causing outages. That is unnecessarily costly to the ratepayers.

Clearance crews have gone overboard just in the past 5 years. Instead of 'Y' pruning trees so that growth is channeled to either side of the wires, while maintaining apical dominance, I often see 'T' pruning, which only encourages watersprouts to grow along the scaffolds. It also forces limbs to overextend across roads. At other times, I have noted smaller sized trees which have reached their maximum height being pruned for no reason. And then there are many trees that aren't seen to be responding to heavy pruning with new growth. Often this is because they are damaged to the point that they simply die back in part or totally. This is most apparent when heavy line clearance is combined with other major physiological stressors such as drought or additional pruning done for truck traffic.

I am not simply an amateur who doesn't like what they see done to trees near powerlines. I count several line clearance arborists as friends and they have advised me over two decades. PlantAmnesty has received grants from utility companies and the International Society of Arboriculture to explain pruning standards to the public. When asked, about 'those damn utility companies', I have often responded that PlantAmnesty is the utility arborist's best friend because when I explain it, they know there is no self interest on my part.

I have personally seen a program of thoughtful, efficient, line-clearance pruning under Ben Barnes of Seattle City Light. He had control of his crews and considered the good of trees, and their tolerances, as well as how to keep costs of line clearance pruning low. Today there seems to be no knowledge of the requirements and responses of different species. The amount of topping has also increased dramatically. I do understand that even topping is sometimes required for safety reasons. But it is the overuse and one-size fits-all approach that is doing unnecessary damage to these trees. Unfortunate as it is, trees under wires are still an important part of Seattle's Urban Forest, accounting for 18% of the City's total urban forest and half of our publically owned trees.

Any savings achieved by lengthening pruning cycles or increasing severity of pruning I believe will be short lived as the unintended consequences will make more work for SCL in the longer term. It also does harm to SCL's reputation as a "Green Utility" and negates the honest efforts that other employees have made with regards to improving customer service and the Department's public image.

Cass Turnbull
PlantAmnesty
Founder/President