

SEATTLE URBAN FORESTRY COMMISSION

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November 18, 2020.

Mayor Jenny A. Durkan and Seattle City Council Members
Seattle City Hall
600 4th Ave
Seattle, WA 98124
RE: City's 2021 Budget

Dear Mayor Durkan and Councilmembers,

This year has been one of the most dramatic years in Seattle's history, and the budget reflects the many challenges the City is facing. The Urban Forestry Commission (UFC) submits this letter in response to the Mayor's [proposed 2021 budget](#), and the Council Budget Committee's subsequent Statements of Legislative intent ([October 28, 2020](#), [October 29, 2020](#), and [November 18, 2020](#)).

Amid Seattle's housing crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting economic crash, the UFC recognizes that the City must make difficult budget decisions. The UFC supports re-centering the City's focus on equity and human rights spending, as demanded by the Black Lives Matter movement. With these constraints in mind, the UFC would like to offer recommendations for adjustments to proposed 2021 budget items relevant to Seattle's urban trees and vegetation. The UFC believes these adjustments will be fiscally advantageous for the City in the long-term.

Unlike the city's gray infrastructure, green infrastructure provided by urban trees and vegetation is unique in that it appreciates in value over time. Also, unlike gray infrastructure, Seattle's urban forest, once lost, cannot be easily recovered even with large capital investments. Seattle's urban forest is a living system that, if managed correctly, will grow in value and increase its benefits for all residents. One of the benefits Seattle gets from its urban forest is cleaner air, which is of critical importance during these times when local air quality is directly [linked](#) to the severity of symptoms for people who have COVID-19. Another key benefit is reducing the urban heat island effect, which is projected to [worsen](#) as climate change continues to progress. For these reasons, the UFC encourages budget decisions that prioritize protecting existing mature trees and new trees planted under projects that are moving forward.

The UFC would like to outline and prioritize four critical budget considerations: Revenue-neutral Council actions, budget effecting Council actions, REET and Green Seattle Partnership (GSP) needs, and SDOT's capital budget.

Revenue Neutral Council Actions

Considering the challenges of the current budget situation, the UFC strongly supports the following items already moving forward as part of Council's proposed budget:

1. [SLI MO-001-A-002](#): *Requesting the Executive to propose a plan for consolidating urban forestry functions.* In 2009, a City Auditor's [report](#) identified inefficiencies that could be corrected through reorganizing urban forestry functions, currently spread across nine different departments. The UFC has commented on this topic numerous times over the last 11 years, most recently in its [7/1/20 letter](#).

The UFC urges action on this front and asks that the opportunity to reconsider an effective urban forestry governance includes a more engaged role for the UFC. Such an enhanced UFC role would align with the spirit of [Ordinance 123052](#) establishing the UFC and better allow the UFC to: "provide policy direction to the Mayor and City Council on preserving and protecting the City's urban forest habitat and its trees and understory vegetation," instead of the UFC being engaged after a fully complete plan is put forth by City staff.

2. [SLI SPU-002-A-001](#): *Requesting SPU to explore an expansion for the tree Ambassador program.* The Tree Ambassador program is a cost-effective way to engage the public on trees and provide stewardship and maintenance of Seattle's canopy. The UFC supports exploring the expansion of this program.
3. This item is currently not within Council's proposed budget. The UFC urges Council to reinstate it. [CBA SDCI-011-A-001](#): *Proviso \$758,663 in SDCI for updated tree protection regulations.* SDCI is now 11 years delinquent on fulfilling Council's request as stated in [Resolution 31138](#) for a strengthened tree ordinance. Additionally, failure to enact and enforce provisions outlined in [Executive Order 03-05](#): Tree Replacement, [Executive Order 2017-11](#): Tree Protection, [Resolution 31870 - Section 6](#), the City Auditors 2009 report, and existing [25.11.090](#) (Tree Replacement and Site Restoration) is leading to the continued loss of tree canopy, documented by the City in the [2016 canopy cover assessment](#). Given the length of time passed and severity of the issues, this proviso is warranted.

Budget Effecting Council Actions

The UFC strongly supports the following proposed Council budget actions and believes the addition of these positions is critical to protecting Seattle's urban trees and vegetation and the benefits they provide:

1. This item is currently not within Council's proposed budget. The UFC urges Council to reinstate it. [CBA SDCI-002-A-001](#): *Add 1 FTE arborist and 1 FTE Housing and Zoning inspector to SDCI and \$275,237 General fund to fund the positions to improve*

enforcement of tree regulations. This proposal is the UFC's highest priority for new funding. SMC 25.11 is not being fully enforced and contains critical program elements that are not being implemented. Additionally, E.O. 2017-11 is still not fully implemented. These positions would substantially increase the City's capacity to implement existing urban forestry responsibilities and prepare to implement efforts outlined in Resolution 31870.

2. [CBA OSE-002-A-001](#): Add \$132K General Fund to OSE for the Green New Deal Advisor position. The UFC has supported the creation of this program and position previously, and feels it is a necessary component of BIPOC-centered efforts, and their environmental intersectionalities.
3. [CBA OSE-004-A-001](#): Add \$140K General fund to OSE for the Climate Policy Advisor position. This is another position that the UFC has supported previously; also of such importance that the sooner this investment is made the more benefits and costs savings can be realized by the City moving forward.

REET and Green Seattle Partnership (GSP)

The UFC notes the Tree Remediation Funding Reserve is included in the REET-balancing budget reductions. Back in 2019, the reduced funding was already of concern and the resulting [response to the SLI](#) provided by SPR on 9/29/2020 details that the effort needed to restore Seattle's forested parklands has increased due multiple factors, and that the timeline of the current goal cannot be met. This is an unacceptable outcome for the GSP.

The GSP program was initiated in 2005 as a [20-year plan](#) to restore Seattle's forested natural areas. The [2017 GSP strategic Plan](#) update showed on-track progress to enroll all of the remaining acres into the program by 2025. The SLI response shows **we are now 17-27 years behind on the original timeline**. Millions of dollars have been spent on GSP, and Seattle residents have invested over a million volunteer hours. This effort is a unique public-private partnership built around a cost-effective 20-year plan that has achieved significant momentum. It would be a terrible loss to see these investments squandered, progress undone, having to play costly catch-up in the future, and not being able to match community-provided resources. The UFC urges Council to take action to reduce the impact to this critical program. The UFC acknowledges that the remaining acres tend to be more challenging. However, the UFC urges prioritizing continuous stewardship of acres already enrolled in the program's restoration process to maintain healthy, invasive-free areas, and establish the next generation of conifer forests.

SDOT Capital Budget:

Finally, the UFC is concerned that significant proposed reductions will result in a waste of past and existing investments in the urban forest. Specifically, [SDOT- BC-TR-19001 - Major Maintenance/Replacement](#), currently slated for a 98% reduction, from \$309,342 in 2019 to \$8,936. This line item includes: "...construction inspection services for landscape elements of transportation capital projects, as well as guidance to developers on the preservation of city

street trees and landscaped sites...” The UFC believes that additional funding for this line item is a worthwhile investment because of the relatively small cost to monitor and maintain trees planted during capital projects compared to the original investment to plant the trees. Properly caring for trees during the establishment period increases the likelihood that the trees will grow well and survive, reducing the potential for costly maintenance or replacement in the future. In addition, the UFC believes that providing guidance to developers on tree preservation is an area where City urban forestry policy and action is currently lacking. The City is already struggling to enforce the existing Tree Protection Ordinance and the UFC worries what reducing these funds further will mean for the city’s urban forest. Any reinstatement of funds to this SDOT urban forestry program would be recommended to maintain adequate support during construction and development affecting street trees.

Again, the UFC recognizes the challenging nature of the 2021 budget process and appreciates your consideration of these recommendations.

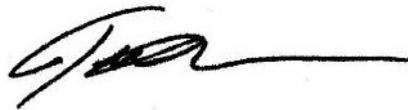
Sincerely,



Weston Brinkley, Chair



Sarah Rehder



Julia Michalak

cc: Jessica Finn Coven, Nathan Torgelson, Jesus Aguirre, Sam Zimbabwe, Mami Hara, Michelle Caulfield, Urban Forestry Management Team, Urban Forestry Core Team, Yolanda Ho, Austin Miller

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