



REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

OFFICE OF CITY AUDITOR – SEATTLE

May 15, 2009

Management of City Trees Can Be Improved

Audit Background

A tree canopy covers 18 percent of Seattle. The City of Seattle's April 2007 Urban Forest Management Plan calls for increasing Seattle's canopy cover to 30 percent in 30 years, and recommends steps that the City should take to preserve, maintain, and enhance Seattle's urban forest to meet that goal.

The City's management of its urban forest is decentralized among nine City departments with tree management or regulatory responsibilities.

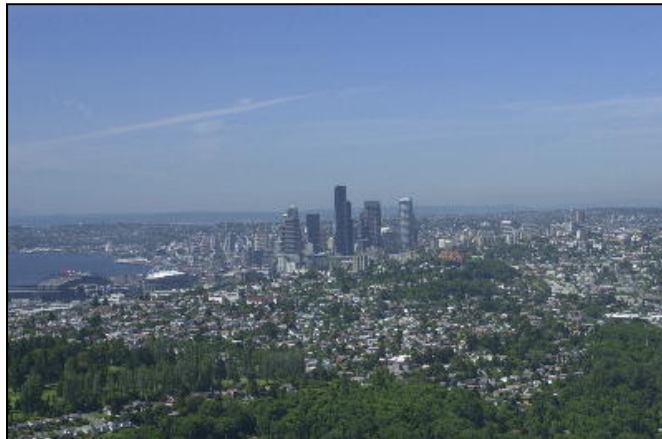
Audit Objectives

The City Council requested that the Office of City Auditor review the City's management of its trees. To help evaluate the effectiveness of the City's urban forestry management program, we:

- Examined the types of actions taken by the City and other stakeholders to implement the Urban Forest Management Plan;
- Identified challenges the City faces in attaining and sustaining the plan's goals; and
- Identified approaches that may be useful to enhance future tree management efforts.

Recommendations

We made a number of recommendations to improve the City's management of trees. These recommendations can be found in Chapter V of the report.



Source: Seattle Municipal Archives

City's Management Framework for Implementing the Urban Forest Management Plan Can Be Strengthened.

While the City has identified tree preservation and increased tree canopy as priorities and individual City department efforts are underway to implement these priorities, the City's current management framework needs to be strengthened in three ways:

1. **Ensure that the organizational entities established in the Urban Forest Management Plan are operational and effective in supporting the City's urban forestry goals.** From February 2008 to February 2009, the Sustainability and Environment Sub-cabinet, which is the executive-level advisory body established by the Urban Forest Management Plan, was not operational. As a result, some operational and policy issues were not resolved. The Sub-cabinet reconvened in February 2009 providing the organizational framework envisioned by the Urban Forest Management Plan.
2. **Unify all City departments behind a single mission through clear and demonstrated leadership by the Office of Sustainability and Environment (OSE).** The City's current approach to tree issues lacks top leadership with the authority and accountability to best ensure implementation of the Urban Forest Management Plan. While the Mayor tasked OSE with the leadership role, there was no agreement within City government or in the public about where program leadership resides. While OSE believes they have the authority and accountability for the Urban Forest Management Plan's implementation, this is not widely known within City government and to the public. Clear lines of authority and effective leadership will help resolve conflicts and better ensure that all City departments are unified behind a single mission.
3. **Develop and agree on a comprehensive strategic plan for implementing the Urban Forest Management Plan.** Although the Urban Forest Management Plan states that it is a "roadmap for a strategic approach", it does not specify: 1) the concrete methods and resources to reach the City's canopy goal; 2) performance measures to evaluate and monitor progress in meeting the canopy goal; 3) external factors that could impact the Urban Forest Management Plan; and 4) ongoing program evaluations to adjust the plan's goals and strategies if necessary.



Seattle Department of Transportation Urban Forestry Workers
Source: Seattle Municipal Archives

Stronger Cooperation and Coordination Needed between Stakeholders

Effective cooperation and coordination on tree management issues is essential, though not ensured, among City departments and between outside stakeholders and the City. This is a challenge when the urban forest competes with utility and transportation infrastructure for limited space in the public right-of-way. Utility and transportation infrastructure includes overhead and underground power lines, trolley lines, roads, sidewalks, trails, drainage and waste water pipes and vaults, and telecommunication equipment. Conflicting goals exist between City departments and outside agencies, and even within departments. Without effective partnerships, the City's ability to meet urban forest and sustainability goals is compromised. For example, Seattle City Light (SCL) recommends that trees planted under power lines should have a mature height of not more than 25 feet for safety and reliability reasons. However, trees are continually being planted that exceed that requirement. The Seattle Department of Transportation's (SDOT) tree planting list which is used for the department's tree planting decisions differs from what SCL and other utility jurisdictions believe are the appropriate size trees to plant under power lines.

Increased Emphasis Needed on Public Outreach and Education

Most of Seattle's trees are on private property and the greatest potential for planting new trees is also on private property. Hence, public outreach and education to promote proper management of privately owned trees and to encourage new tree planting are paramount in the City's effort to sustain and expand the tree canopy. OSE has developed and implemented public outreach and education with limited resources, and will require adequate resources to continue this effort. OSE will have fewer resources in 2009 than in 2008 for these efforts.

Tree Inventory Needed for Making Sound Resource Management

Decisions The City does not currently have a complete inventory of City-managed trees that would enable it to make sound resource management

decisions. By accumulating, updating, and using information collected by a tree inventory, urban forest managers can forecast trends, anticipate maintenance needs, facilitate budgeting for tree-related expenditures, and develop long range plans. The Department of Parks and Recreation, SDOT, and the Seattle Center are performing or have recently completed tree inventories. Parks has inventoried trees in approximately 10 to 15 percent of its developed parks. According to information we received from SDOT in May 2009, it has completed an inventory on about 37,000 street trees it is responsible for – this comprises about 26 percent of all street trees in Seattle. Seattle Center has completed a tree inventory of its 74-acre campus.

City Goals Need to Include Realistic Funding Assumptions

While some tree improvements are inexpensive, most require substantial and continuous funding. Demand for funding has far outstripped the amounts made available. For example, SDOT and Parks requested respectively \$1.1 million and \$500,000 for the 2009-2010 biennium for tree crews to conduct tree maintenance. However, neither request was funded. Budget constraints will require that the City carefully prioritize how to maximize urban forestry goals within available resources.

Implementing New Tree Regulations Is an Important Next Step for Tree Preservation

The Department of Planning and Development has been evaluating the existing tree protection regulations that govern tree retention on private property. The Mayor proposed new interim tree regulations in September 2008 that the City Council passed in 2009. The new regulations will close a loophole used by developers to remove trees before applying for a development permit. The City has slowed down the regulations development process until the new satellite canopy cover analysis is completed. It is anticipated that new tree regulations will be proposed in late 2009. In addition, the Department of Planning and Development will conduct an analysis to determine the resources necessary to fully implement the new regulations.

A copy of the Office of City Auditor's full report can be obtained at the Auditor's website at <http://seattle.gov/audit> or by calling (206) 233-3801. Please direct any questions or comments regarding this report, or suggestions for future audits to Susan Cohen, Seattle City Auditor, at (206) 233-3801 or susan.cohen@seattle.gov