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Seattle Urban Forestry Commission

2017 Annual Report

Introduction

2017 was a year of forward movement for the Urban Forestry Commission's (UFC) efforts. As the UFC celebrated its 8th year, it 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 support City ongoing decision-making to continue to protect and grow Seattle's trees, 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.

2017 Accomplishments

The UFC has been pressing the City to update the tree protection ordinance since its inception in 2009. This year finally brought some progress to this issue. The Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) and the Office of Sustainability & Environment (OSE) undertook the Tree Regulations Research Project to assess how effective existing regulations are in protecting our urban trees. SDCI briefed the UFC on the findings and recommendations of this effort and the mayoral executive order that derived from this work, as well as a new Director's Rule to assess penalties for illegal tree removal. The UFC is excited to see steps being taken to improve tree protection and is looking forward to supporting the City through this process.

Tree Regulations Research Project

The objective of this assessment was to produce tree protection recommendations. The scope of the project was to look at effectiveness of existing regulations in Multifamily Low-rise and Single-family zones, as well as look at examples of tree protection regulations in regional cities and those similar in size to Seattle.

The main project findings included the following:

- Seattle is losing exceptional trees and groves, mostly in environmental critical areas, specifically in landslide-prone areas;
- Increase in development is resulting in tree loss;
- Large tree species and conifers are being replaced by smaller deciduous trees;

- Landscaping standards are not being consistently applied, inspected or enforced;
- The design review process is not helping preserve trees;
- When exceptional trees are deemed hazardous their removal doesn't require replacement;
- Since 2008, there is an upward trend in resolving tree cutting complaints as 'non-violation';
- Tree cutting complaints were resolved with retroactive hazardous tree removal approval and not mitigation; and
- There is a perceived lack of responsiveness to tree removal complaints (as stated during public comment periods at UFC meetings).

The project produced three recommendations:

1. Make improvements to the way existing regulations are implemented including: revising the definition for 'hazard' conditions; requiring consistent documentation for permit applications that include tree code requirements and tree removal applications; including tree survivability language in the code; updating the Director's Rule for exceptional trees; exploring a payment-in-lieu option; recording tree counts throughout the development process; requiring use of monitoring tools for tree-related site work and survivability; ensuring the use of the Landscape Improvement Checklist at final inspection, and capturing this information so that it can be queried; adding dedicated urban forestry staff to SDCI's efforts to oversee all tree and landscape regulations; and removing Vine Maple from the ECA Revegetation List and Green Factor list to improve tree size class distribution.

The process improvement recommendations included implementation of a training program internal to the City – on code enforcement and tree protection, preservation, and planting; and external, establishing a training requirement for tree service companies to then hold them accountable for illegal tree removals.

2. A permit system to protect additional trees on private property. The permit would track allowance for annual removal of three trees with diameters smaller than 6"; remove the allowance for unlimited tree removal in Single family lots smaller than 5,000 sqft; and require mitigation. To protect additional trees the City would establish penalties for injury and removal violations. This would hold tree services companies accountable while providing an administrative appeal of penalties.
3. A permit system 'plus' to protect even more trees. This would be achieved by protecting tree groves through covenants; provide support to home owners; and explore transfer of development rights.

Mayor Burgess' executive order directed SDCI to implement non-legislative recommendations that do not require code changes and the Office of Planning and Community Development (OPCD) to work with the City's Urban Forestry Core Team to enhance tree preservation.

The UFC issued a letter commending the Mayor, OSE, and SDCI for their work and recommending that the City continue the deliberative process to consider implementation of the tree removal permit as stated in Options 2 and 3 to further support Seattle's canopy cover, tree protection, and tree preservation.

2016 LiDAR Tree Canopy Cover Assessment

Another important City accomplishment this year was finalizing the 2016 LiDAR Tree Canopy Cover Assessment. This assessment is the most accurate accounting of canopy cover to date and shows Seattle at 28% canopy cover. The study determined canopy cover levels for the nine Urban

Forest Stewardship Plan (UFSP) Management Units, different areas of Seattle, and Street tree management units. The study also showed the conifer to deciduous tree ratio; the location of the largest trees and tree groves; the relationship between canopy and environmental equity; and tree canopy and the heat island effect.

The City also presented the findings of a canopy cover trend analysis done in 2015 using aerial and satellite imagery. Even though this is a different methodology, it provided interesting information about canopy cover change over time for 2007, 2010, and 2015, estimating a 2% loss over the span of the eight-year study period (with a +/- 3% margin of error due to the methodology used).

The assessment provides the foundation for understanding the quantity, distribution, and configuration of tree canopy in Seattle and it will be important for the City to do this type of study every five years to be able to make adjustments to tree management efforts based on results. The true value of this type of assessment is realized when the results are used to guide urban forestry policy and management efforts.

Building Relationships

The UFC wanted to work on building partnerships in 2017. To that effect the UFC engaged with Seattle Audubon, King County Million Trees Campaign, City Fruit, Urban Forestry Symposium, as well as the annual UFC/Interdepartmental Team working meeting.

City Urban Forestry Efforts

The UFC received many briefings from the City's urban forestry team as well as from other efforts that affect our urban trees. Briefings received in 2017 include:

Office of Planning and Community Development

- Mandatory Housing Affordability (MHA) EIS
- MHA tree requirements

Office of Sustainability & Environment

- 2016 LiDAR Canopy Cover Assessment
- Duwamish Tree Canopy Enhancement Project and tour

Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections:

- Design Review Process update
- Environmental Critical Areas update
- Tree protection enforcement. DR 21-2017 on Calculating Tree Valuations and Civil Penalties for Tree Protection Code Violations
- Tree Regulations Research Project and Mayoral Tree Protection Executive Order

Seattle Department of Transportation:

- SDOT Street Tree Management Plan
- Trees for Seattle Story Map

Seattle Parks and Recreation

- Thinning Green Seattle Partnership (GSP) sites
- Washington Park Arboretum Azalea Garden
- Colman Park Vegetation Management Plan
- GSP Strategic Plan update

Seattle Public Utilities

- Trees for Seattle update on the Trees for Neighborhoods and Tree Ambassador projects

Non-City of Seattle briefings included:

- Colman Vista project presented by the community
- Yesler Terrace redevelopment project and tour
- Seattle Children's Major Institution Plan presentation
- University of Washington Urban Forestry Management Plan
- Seattle Audubon Neighborhoods Flyways and Urban Bird Treaty

UFC Recommendations:

The UFC issued the following letters of recommendation:

Tree Protection Executive Order and Tree Regulations Research Project: The UFC commended the Mayor, OSE, and SDCI for their work and recommending that the City continue the deliberative process to consider implementation of the tree removal permit as stated in Options 2 and 3 to further support Seattle's canopy cover, tree protection, and tree preservation.

Support for Seattle Children's Hospital: the UFC commended Seattle Children's on how they approach their development as an example of how this work can be done by other major institutions. Children's design and construction team exhibited ingenuity, diligence, and innovation to exceed the letter and intent of the tree protection ordinance during the multi-phase expansion of the hospital.

Design Review Program improvements: The UFC wrote to CM Johnson to point out that the proposed changes conflict with the 30% canopy cover goal of the Urban Forest Stewardship Plan and made two recommendations: 1) to track exceptional tree and canopy removal per project to implement appropriate mitigating tree planting efforts, and 2) to provide a fee-in-lieu option for projects unable to replace trees equal to the number of trees and amount of canopy removed by a project.

Mandatory Housing Affordability Draft EIS: The UFC commended the MHA Draft EIS for stressing the importance of tree coverage for Seattle and incorporating the 2016 canopy cover assessment results. The Commission disagreed with the Draft EIS' determination of no significant impacts to the city's tree canopy and requested clarification regarding the proposed methodology and mitigation measures.

Urban Bird Treaty: the UFC congratulated Council and the Mayor for their leadership to make Seattle an Urban Bird Treaty City and joining more than 25 other cities across the country that support bird habitat.

SCL and SDOT tree pruning cycle coordination: recommending SCL to maintain funding levels to support four-year pruning cycles. The UFC also recommended the City to examine opportunities for better coordination and efficiency between SCL and SDOT tree pruning work.

University of Washington Urban Forest Management Plan: commending the UW for going beyond the City's current canopy cover goal for institutional properties by setting a goal of 23% by 2037 and emphasizing the importance of their urban trees with specific actions. The UFC encouraged the UW to address their invasive species challenges by exploring partnerships with groups such as the Green Seattle Partnership.

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

The Commission and the Urban Forest Inter-departmental Team had their annual meeting at Camp Long. The facilitated meeting focused on strengthening the partnership between the Urban Forestry Commission and the Urban Forest Interdepartmental Team in order to accomplish the goals of the Urban Forest Stewardship Plan (UFSP), and working together to seed thoughts, set expectations, strategize, and build momentum for updating the UFSP. The group revisited best practices for urban forest management plans; had a discussion around the UFSP's key elements, structure, and goals; and identified and mapped UFSP stakeholders.

Commission Membership

The Commission was very sad with the passing of Commissioner Donna Kostka in June. Donna brought a committed voice with substantial experience to the Urban Ecologist position. Three new members joined the Urban Forestry Commission in 2017: Megan Herzog (Position #10 – Get Engaged member), Craig Johnson (Position#9 -Realtor), and Sarah Rehder (Position #4 - Hydrologist). Weston Brinkley was elected chair for 2018 with Steve Zemke serving as vice-chair.

City Council passed legislation to expand the UFC membership adding three new positions: Position #11 - Environmental justice representative; Position #12 – Public health representative; and Position #13 - Community/neighborhood representative from an underrepresented group in the environmental field, including communities of color, immigrants, refugees, low-income and youth.

Conclusion

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2017 Commission Members:

Tom Early, Chair: Landscape Architect—Position #6
Steve Zemke, Vice-chair: Wildlife Biologist—Position #1
Craig Johnson – Realtor – Position #9
Donna Kostka: Urban Ecologist —Position #2
Weston Brinkley: University Representative (Antioch University)—Position #3
Leif Fixen: Arborist —Position #5
Megan Herzog: Get Engaged – Position #10
Joanna Nelson de Flores: NGO Representative—Position #7
Andrew Zellers: Development Community Representative —Position #8
Sarah Rehder – Hydrologist – Position #4

Contact:

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