

MATERIAL PREPARED FOR DISCUSSION BY THE URBAN FORESTRY COMMISSION. THIS DELIBERATIVE DOCUMENT DOES NOT REFLECT THE OPINION OF THE URBAN FORESTRY COMMISSION AND MAY OR MAY NOT MOVE FORWARD TO VOTE.

2021 Budget Letter Draft

November 6, 2020

Dear Mayor and Council -

Two-Thousand Twenty has been one of the most dramatic years in Seattle's history, and the budget reflects this volatility. The Urban Forest Commission (UFC) submits this letter in response to the Mayor's proposed 2021 budget (LINK), and the Council Budget Committee's subsequent Statements of Legislative intent (LINK).

Amid our housing crisis, Covid-19, and the subsequent 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 protests. With these constraints in mind, the UFC recommends some adjustments to proposed 2021 budget items relevant to the city's trees and vegetation. We believe these adjustments will be fiscally advantageous for the City in the long term.

Unlike the city's gray infrastructure, green infrastructure provided by our trees and vegetation is unique in that it appreciates in value over time. Also unlike gray infrastructure, our urban forest cannot be recovered quickly even with large capital investments. Our urban forest is a living system that if managed correctly will grow and increase its benefits for all residents. One of the benefits the city gets from our 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. (LINK) Another key benefit is reducing the urban heat island effect, which is projected to worsen as climate change continues to progress (CITATION). For these reasons, the UFC encourages budget decisions that prioritize protecting trees we have in place and new trees planted under projects that are moving forward.

We outline four critical budget considerations: Revenue neutral Council actions, REET and Green Seattle Partnership (GSP) needs, SDOT capital budget, and Budget effecting Council actions -

Revenue Neutral Council Actions

Considering the challenges of the current budget situation, the UFC strongly supports moving forward with the following revenue neutral items proposed by Council:

1. *SLI OSE-006-A-001: Requesting OSE to propose a plan for consolidating urban forestry functions.* In 2009 a City Auditors report (LINK) 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 over the last 11 years, most recently in our 7/1/20 letter (LINK).

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The UFC urges action on this front, and ask that this opportunity to effectively reconsider forestry management consider a more engaged role for the UFC. This clarified role would align with the spirit of the UFC enabling legislation SMC 3.72.050 (LINK) be evoked to ensure that the UFC is allowed 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”, not simply be asked to comment on a fully complete plan put forth by City staff.

2. CBA SDCI-011-A-001: Proviso \$758,663 in SDCI for updated tree protection regulations. The SDCI is now 11 years delinquent on following through with Council request for strengthened tree ordinance Resolution 31138. Additionally, provisions outlined in EO 03-05 (LINK), EO 2017-11 (LINK), Resolution 31870, the City Auditors 2009 report, and existing 25.11.090 are all not being enforced and enacted leading to the continued loss of tree canopy, documented by the City itself in the 2016 canopy cover assessment (LINK). Given the length of time passed and severity of the issues, this proviso is warranted.
3. *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 engagement the public on trees and provide stewardship and maintance of our city’s canopy. Please explore the expansion of this program.

REET and 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 (link) details that the effort needed to restore our existing urban forest has increased due multiple factors and that the timeline of the current goal cannot be met. This is an unacceptable outcome for the Green Seattle Partnership (GSP).

The GSP program was initiated in 2005 as a 20 year plan (LINK) to restore Seattle’s forested natural areas. The 2017 GSP strategic Plan update (LINK) showed on track progress to enroll all of the forested acres into the program by 2025. The SLI response shows **we are now 17-27 years behind on this timeline**. Millions of dollars have been spent on GSP, and over a million volunteer hours have invested. It would be a terrible loss to see these investments squandered, progress undone, and community provided match not met by the City. The UFC urges Council take action to reduce the impact to this critical program. Further reductions will also result in increasing the risk of losing the mature trees we have.

SDOT Capital Budget:

Additionally, UFC is concerned that significant proposed reductions will result in a waste of past and existing investments in the urban forest. As an example 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

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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 the relatively small cost of monitoring and maintaining trees planted during capital investment projects protects the investment in planting the trees to begin with. Properly caring for trees during the establishment period increases likelihood that the trees 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 tree policy and action is currently lacking. The City is already struggling to enforce the existing Tree Protection Ordinance and the UFC worries what reducing the funds further will mean for the city’s urban forest.

Budget Effecting Council Actions

Finally, the UFC strongly supports the following proposed Council Budget Actions and believe the addition of these positions is critical protecting our city’s trees and vegetation and the benefits they provide:

1. *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 capacity of the city to implement existing responsibilities with trees 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.* 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.