



Memo

Date: September 19, 2022
To: Board of Parks and Recreation Commissioners
From: Christopher Williams, Acting Superintendent
From: Todd Burley, Strategic Advisor and Michele Finnegan, Deputy Superintendent of Policy
Subject: Tree Management Policy

Background

In July, SPR presented a recommendation for updating the Tree Management Policy. The Board of Parks and Recreation Commissioners requested a formal Public Hearing and vote at a meeting in the near future. The Public Notice was posted in the Daily Journal of Commerce, and the Hearing will be on September 22nd at the BPRC meeting. The attached policy incorporates feedback from SPR subject matter experts, peer review at the City, and aligns with industry best practices.

Recommendation

SPR recommends a vote in favor of the updated Tree Management Policy as described in the attached document.



Tree Management Policy		Number: 5.6.1.2
		Date: September 1, 2022
		Supersedes: 5.6.1 (June 1, 2001)
Approved:	Department: Parks & Recreation	Page 1 of 6

1.0 **PREAMBLE**

Seattle's park and recreation system is made up of over 488 parks on 6,441 acres with an estimated 500,000 trees. Managed by Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR), the system has over 4,000 acres of developed parkland and more than 2,700 acres of natural areas, both of which support Seattle's urban forest. The urban forest includes not just trees, but also shrubs, understory plants, soil, insects, and wildlife. SPR's Urban Forestry Team plants, maintains, and removes trees on SPR property.

2.0 **PURPOSE**

This policy supports SPR's commitment to healthy people, a healthy environment, and strong communities. Seattle's urban forest provides important ecological and public health benefits for Seattle's growing population and this Tree Management Policy supports the City's goals of increasing overall tree canopy, promoting tree health and longevity within parks, and ensuring trees on SPR parkland are managed in a manner consistent with other City departments and with industry standards.

This Tree Management Policy will guide SPR's decision-making process for the care of trees.

3.0 **CITY DEPARTMENTS AFFECTED**

- Finance & Administrative Services
- Office of Sustainability & Environment
- Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections
- Seattle Department of Transportation
- Seattle City Light
- Seattle Public Utilities

4.0 **REFERENCES**

- Seattle Urban Forest Management Plan
- Executive Order: 03-05 Two for One Tree Replacement
- International Society of Arboricultural (ISA) Best Management Practices
- Seattle Municipal Code (SMC) 15.43 – Tree and Vegetation Management in Public Places
- SMC 25.09 – Regulations for Environmentally Critical Areas

- SMC 25.11 – Tree Protection
- SMC 18.30 – Enforcement Against Unauthorized Use of Park Property
- Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA) – American National Standards Institute (ANSI) A300
- TCIA – ANSI Z133.1 Safety Standards
- TCIA – Standard Definitions for the Green Industry
- SDCI Directors Rule 16-2008: Designation of Exceptional Trees

5.0 POLICY

5.1 Management Framework

5.1.1 Decision Criteria – It is the policy of SPR that all decisions regarding tree management will be based on the following criteria:

- Safety: Seattle’s parks and facilities should be safe for the public to use.
- Park Function: A park or facility’s intended use should be maintained whenever possible.
- Urban Forest Health: The ecosystem services and human health benefits Seattle’s urban forest provides will be supported and enhanced.
- Equitable Distribution of Services: SPR acknowledges the importance of the City’s Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) and is committed to achieving an equitable distribution of tree maintenance services and planting as one step toward eliminating racial disparities and achieving racial equity in Seattle.

5.1.2 Environmentally Critical Areas – SPR is allowed to remove and replace trees and vegetation in Environmentally Critical Areas (ECAs) per SMC 25.09.

5.1.3 Park-Specific Plans – Vegetation Management Plans and other park-specific plans must be consistent with the Seattle Municipal Code and this policy. Any exception needs approval by the Superintendent.

5.2 Capital Projects

Current and future risk to and from trees shall be considered when siting and completing capital projects. To the extent feasible, capital projects will preserve and design around healthy trees, rare or unusual species, and trees with historical significance. Removal will be considered only when there are no acceptable alternatives to placement or renovation of facilities, equipment, and/or infrastructure.

An SPR certified arborist will be involved in all phases of tree management during planning, design, and construction of capital projects.

5.3 Removal

Tree removal must be approved by an SPR-certified arborist. A tree assessment will be conducted prior to tree removal. All tree assessments will use an industry-standard assessment protocol and be performed by a qualified tree risk assessor. All assessments are valid for no more than one (1) year after date of inspection, and during normal weather conditions. Trees will not be removed for the benefit of private purposes including views, solar access, aesthetic preferences, or debris complaints. A good faith effort will be made to consider options for changing park use patterns in

order to retain trees. Any trees removed will be replaced on a 2:1 basis, per Executive Order 03-05, following guidance in Section 5.6.

5.4 Reasons for Removal

5.4.1 Risk – SPR will remove trees that pose an unacceptable risk to safety and cannot be mitigated through pruning, cabling, or other intervention methods. Risk will be determined by a qualified tree risk assessor.

5.4.2 Park Function – Trees that interfere with use or access to a park that cannot be mitigated through pruning or other methods may be removed if reasonable use changes are not available. Examples of interference include, but are not limited to, blocking sightlines for safety, preventing use of playfields or playgrounds, and blocking or heaving sidewalks/paved paths. Trees are an essential element of park design and function and will be retained where possible.

5.4.3 Ecological Thinning – Ecological thinning and forest gap enhancement methods are approved tools for addressing stem density and single-species dominance in natural area parks being managed as part of SPR's Green Seattle Partnership.

5.4.4 Pest Outbreak/Disease – Tree removal to contain an outbreak of pests or disease will only be considered as a last resort in the face of a serious threat to forest health determined by the SPR Arborist.

5.4.4 Weed Species – Tree species identified as noxious weeds on the King County Noxious Weeds List or as naturalizing species impacting forest health by Green Seattle Partnership may be considered for herbicide treatment or removal to support forest restoration goals. These species are identified in the Green Seattle Partnership Work Specifications and are updated annually.

5.4.5 View Management – SPR identifies certain parks for views and manages them through the Viewpoint Designations Policy (60-P 2.17). Tree and vegetation management performed in an Environmentally Critical Area to preserve view corridors must be in line with SMC 25.09. Tree removal or pruning for designated viewpoints will be conducted if and only when it is safe and does not put people or property in jeopardy.

5.5 Pruning

All SPR pruning operations, including root pruning, will follow ANSI A300 standards. Trees will not be pruned for private views, aesthetic preferences, or debris complaints. Tree topping is not permitted. All effort will be made to maintain the health of the tree.

5.6 Planting

All tree planting will be conducted by SPR staff or approved partners and will follow ANSI A300 standards. SPR staff will choose species that maximize future ecological benefits, with an emphasis on planting trees that are large at maturity, evergreen, resilient to climate change, and adapted to local site conditions. Species will also be selected that align with existing historic designations, design, or other plans for specific parks. In developed parks, deciduous trees will be placed, to the extent possible, in groves to allow for retention of leaf litter. To ensure proper establishment care, newly planted trees will receive supplemental watering until established; individual tree needs and future climate conditions will be considered to determine the duration of establishment watering.

5.7 Integrated Pest Management

Certain tree diseases will be treated as resources allow following SPR's Integrated Pest Management best management practices. The threat to, and overall health of, the urban forest will be weighed against the drawbacks of using chemical treatment.

5.8 Tree Protection

5.8.1 Construction – Trees at risk of damage will be protected during construction activities. All tree protection must follow industry standards outlined in ANSI A300 and SMC 25.11.

5.8.2 Vandalism and Illegal Cutting – Whenever possible, action will be taken to investigate and prosecute vandalism and illegal cutting of city-owned trees. Section 18.12.070 of the Park Codes makes it illegal for anyone to vandalize or remove vegetation in a park. Compensation for damages will be sought based on the appraised value in accordance with the current version of the ISA Guide for Plant Appraisal, cost of replacement plantings, and subsequent maintenance. In addition, SPR may work with SDCI to enforce Chapter 25.11 as an alternative to or in addition to pursuing an action under 18.12.070.C.

5.8.3 Rare Specimens – Individual trees that are considered rare, significant, or exceptional because of size, species, or historical significance will be given extra protections and consideration for retention. This may include, but not be limited to, trees identified through the Heritage Tree Program or other similar City programs.

5.8.4 Maintenance Practices – Maintenance practices will protect existing tree roots, trunks, or branches. Supportive practices for tree health will be prioritized by SPR, including mulching, irrigation, and the use of tree rings to build healthy soil conditions.

5.8.5 Park Use Impacts – SPR staff will evaluate plans, programs, activities, and practices to limit possible damage to existing trees, including canopy, roots, and soil.

5.9 Wildlife Habitat

In some instances, a portion of a tree removed for the reasons listed above will be left standing as a wildlife snag. When possible, this practice will be prioritized over total removal. Tree species, location, and park design will guide decisions about when to create wildlife snags. Logs and branches from removal or pruning operations will be left on-site, when possible and not in conflict with function or design intent, to contribute large woody debris to improve forest health and ecosystem services.

SPR will consider habitat impacts of tree removal and maintenance activities. Tree management activities will include seasonal considerations – such as bird nesting, amphibian breeding, and saturated wetland soils – and prioritize reducing negative ecosystem impacts.

5.10 Trees Adjacent to Private Property

5.10.1 Fallen Trees – In accordance with legal precedent, the owner of the property on which the tree or branch fell is responsible for cleaning up debris. If a tree or branch located on SPR property fails and falls on to private property, it is the private property owner’s responsibility. If a private property owner’s tree or branch fails and falls on SPR property, SPR is responsible.

5.10.2 Pruning at Property Lines – If branches or roots from a tree on an adjacent property extend over a property line, the owner of that property is allowed to prune branches or roots back to their property line if they so choose. Any proposed work on trees with trunks that straddle property lines will need to be agreed upon by both adjacent property owners.

5.10.3 Planting and Placement – Trees planted and placed on SPR property will be chosen in support of ecological benefits, habitat, park function and design considerations, and specific Vegetation Management Plans, and not for private views, solar access, aesthetic preferences or other private benefits.

5.11 Recreational Use of Trees

Park users are not permitted to decorate, trim, build upon, remove, or otherwise cause damage to trees on SPR property. Webbing of at least 1-inch wide must be used for slacklines and hammocks, and only on trees or portions of trees at least 16 inches in diameter, to protect trees from damage. Tree climbing by, or under the supervision of, qualified professionals may be permitted through a permit, concession agreement, or special event permit. Any recreational use of trees is conducted at your own risk.

5.12 Permitting

Unauthorized use of park property, including failure to apply for and obtain a Revocable Use Permit, is unlawful and subject to enforcement actions or other remedies as specified in Seattle Municipal Code 18.30.

SPR may allow the public to perform work or hire a contractor to perform work on property owned by SPR, through a Revocable Use Permit for Non-Park Use of Park Property. If access to or through SPR property is needed to maintain a tree on private property, a Revocable Use Permit is necessary.

6.0 DEFINITIONS

Certified Arborist: An individual who is current with the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) requirements and qualifications and currently holds the credential of Certified Arborist.

Developed Parkland: Properties owned or managed by SPR that have been designed and are regularly maintained for specific recreational uses. These include, but are not limited to, athletic fields, play areas, shrub beds, sports courts, and multi-use trails.

Establishment Period: A sufficient period for the tree to develop its root and canopy structure to withstand the impacts of weather and climate change. The Establishment Period can be adjusted as growing conditions evolve in the future.

Green Seattle Partnership: A collaboration between the City of Seattle and community partners to restore and actively maintain Seattle’s forested parklands.

Integrated Pest Management: Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is an effective and environmentally sensitive approach to pest management that relies on a combination of common-sense practices. IPM programs use current, comprehensive information on the life cycles of pests and their interaction with the environment. This information, in combination with available pest control methods, is used to manage pest damage by the most economical means, and with the least possible hazard to people, property, and the environment.

Natural Areas: Parks owned and managed by SPR that include native ecosystems such as forests, meadows, wetlands, and riparian corridors. Natural areas are managed primarily for their ecosystem benefits.

Pruning: The selective removal of plant parts using approved practices to meet specific goals and objectives. Can include root pruning.

Structural Defect: Any natural occurring or secondary condition such as cavity, poor branch attachment, cracks, or decayed wood in the trunk, crown or roots of a tree that may contribute to structural failure.

Topping: The severe and indiscriminate cutting back of limbs to stubs within the tree's crown, to such a degree as to remove the normal canopy and disfigure the tree; or the cutting back of limbs or branches to lateral branches that are not sufficiently large enough to assume the terminal role or are less than one-half of the diameter of the limb or branch that is cut.

Tree Canopy: The area of the city covered by the branch and leaf structure of trees. In the case of an individual tree, canopy is the branches and leaves.

Tree Removal: Destruction of a tree or tree parts, through either direct or indirect actions that cause irreversible damage and result in mortality.

Tree Risk Assessment: A systematic approach for evaluating trees or groups of trees to determine the likelihood that a part, or multiple parts, may fail within a specified timeframe and impact targets.

Qualified Tree Risk Assessor: An individual who is proficient with the fundamentals of tree risk assessment; and understand the principles of advanced diagnostic techniques for assessing tree risk, can gather and synthesize the information needed to assess tree risk, and is able to make reasoned judgments and sound recommendations for mitigating identified risk.

Vegetation Management Plans: A plan for the long-term restoration, renovation, and care of the vegetation within the boundaries of a particular site.

Wildlife Snags: Dead or dying tree(s), or portions of tree(s) left standing to function as wildlife habitat as the tree naturally decomposes.

7.0 **RESPONSIBILITY**

It is SPR's responsibility to maintain trees on City-owned parkland for the benefit of the public good. After consideration of professional guidance from SPR's arborists, the SPR Superintendent (or his/her designee) is authorized to make decisions regarding tree maintenance.