

# STREET TREE PLANNING STUDY

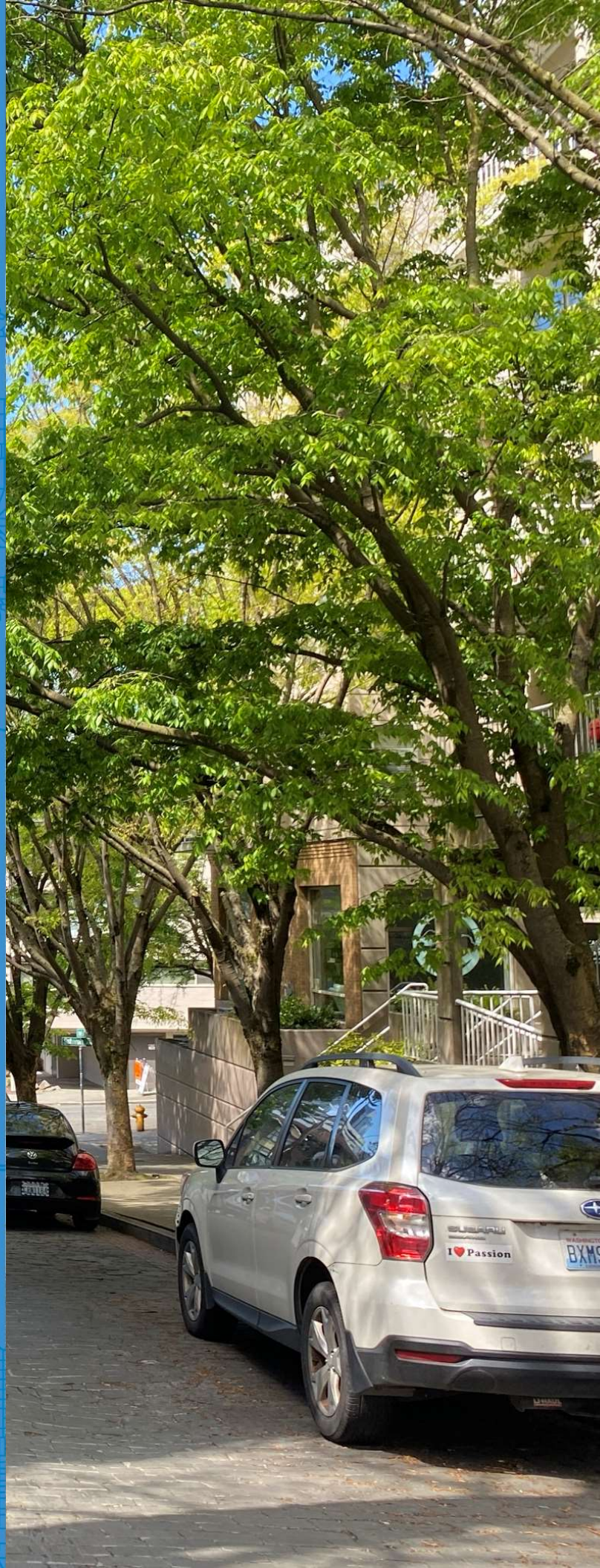
Capitol Hill/Olive Way  
Census Tract 74.05

City Council District 3

Submitted 5/30/25



**Seattle**  
Department of  
Transportation





# Study background

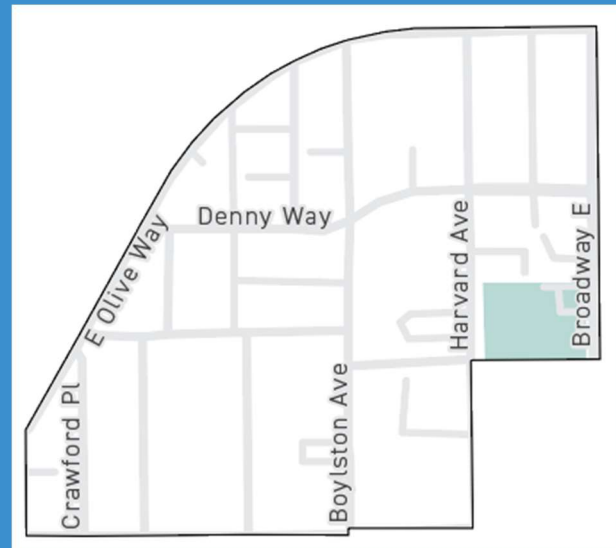
The City of Seattle is committed to ensuring all communities have access to healthy trees and the benefits they provide—especially in the face of a changing climate. In early 2025, the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) launched the Street Tree Planning Study as a pilot project to identify street tree planting opportunities, assess community support, and understand local concerns in four census tracts that represent conditions across the city. Funds for the study were provided by the Washington State Department of Natural Resources Urban and Community Forestry Program. This memo summarizes findings from the Capitol Hill/Olive Way census tract. It includes results from an arborist assessment and from community engagement.

## What are street trees?



Street trees grow in the public right-of-way – usually in planting strips between sidewalks and curbs – and are managed by SDOT. Street trees provide environmental, health, and social benefits, such as cooling neighborhoods and reducing air pollution.

Seattle aims to achieve 30% tree canopy coverage by 2037, across all public and private spaces.



A 2021 study showed street trees comprise nearly one-quarter of Seattle's existing tree canopy. The study also showed an overall loss of tree canopy, prompting SDOT to analyze opportunities and barriers to planting street trees.

## Capitol Hill/ Olive Way overview

Census Tract 74.05 is located just east of downtown Seattle. The tract includes about 32 acres of multi-family residences and commercial/mixed-use properties bordered by E Olive St, E Olive Way, and Broadway E. Existing tree canopy coverage in Capitol Hill/Olive Way is 15.02%, which is less than the city's goal of 30%. As of 2023, more than 2,500 people live within the census tract. 19% speak a language other than English. The majority of residents are men, and most are between 25 and 29 years old. Approximately 64% of the population is white, 12% are Asian, 8% are black and about 6% identify with two or more races.

## Equity and health snapshot

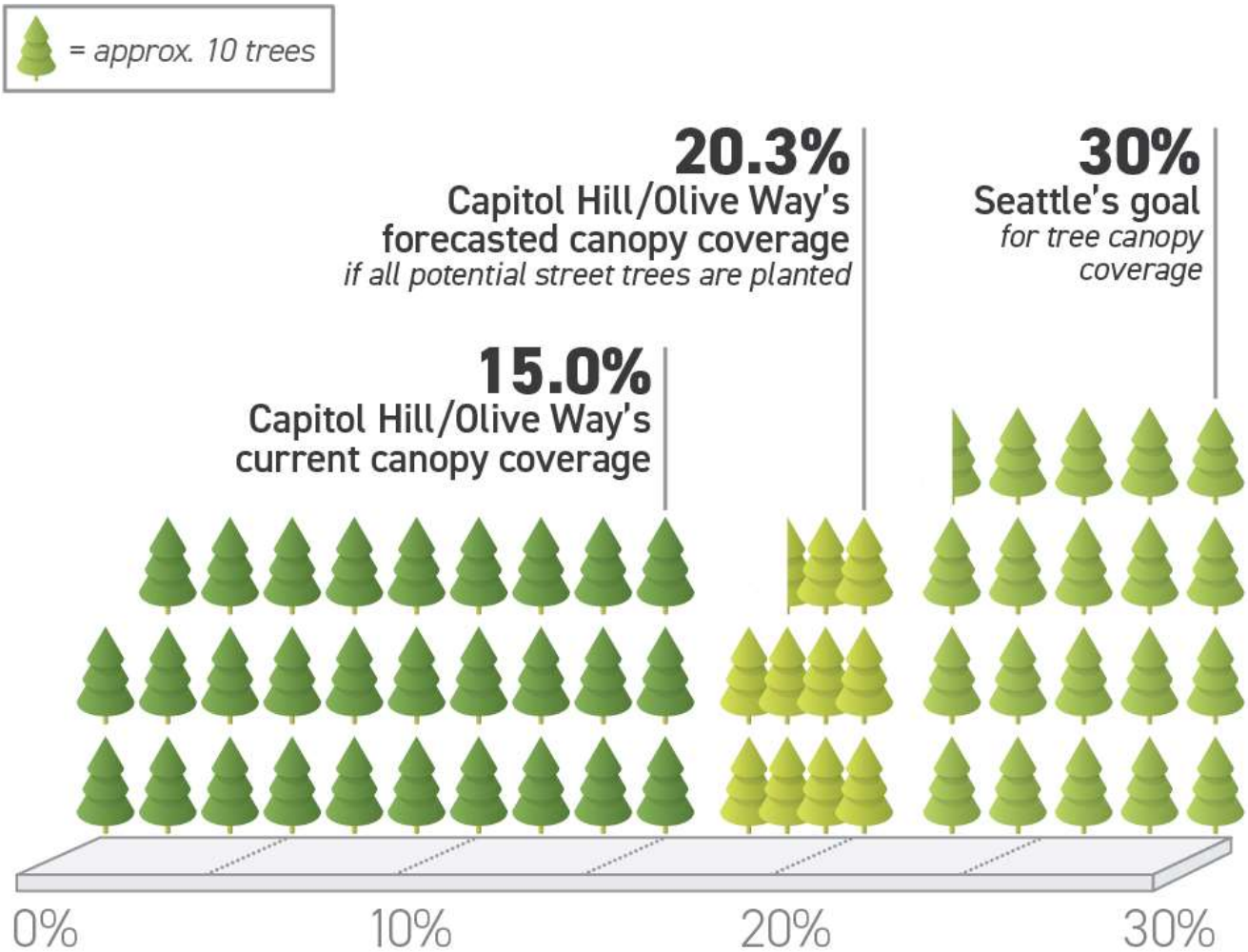
The city uses a [Racial and Social Equity Index](#) tool to plan and prioritize investments throughout the city. Based on this index, Capitol Hill/Olive Way is considered a part of the Highest Equity Priority in Seattle across race, language, socioeconomic, and health indicators.

The 2025 [Washington Environmental Health Disparities Map](#) shows health measures divided into four themes: environmental exposures, environmental effects, sensitive populations, and socioeconomic. Capitol Hill/Olive Way ranks high overall, particularly for Particulate Matter (PM) 2.5 emissions, traffic related pollution, and toxic releases. PM 2.5 is small particle air pollution that enters the lungs and can cause serious health problems. Capitol Hill/Olive Way ranks low only for ozone concentration. Trees absorb, bind, intercept, and sequester pollutants, including PM 2.5 emissions. Trees also reduce air temperatures, which lowers ozone levels.

## Where can we put street trees in this census tract?

With many apartment buildings and limited open space, finding room to plant trees in Capitol Hill/Olive Way is difficult. In a dense neighborhood like Capitol Hill, every new street tree requires planning and coordination. The city identified potential street tree planting sites using mapping analysis and on-site inspections. In addition to 105 potential street tree planting sites and 289 existing street trees, this census tract requires 196 more trees to reach the city's goal of 30%.

While 105 potential street trees represent only part of what's needed, each new street tree is progress toward our overall goal.





*Census Tract 74.05 – Existing Tree Canopy and Potential Street Tree Planting Locations*



## What are our existing challenges with street trees?

Space in Capitol Hill/Olive Way is limited and often already occupied by infrastructure, such as buildings, sidewalks, roads, and utilities. Of the 105 potential planting sites identified, only 17% could be planted today.

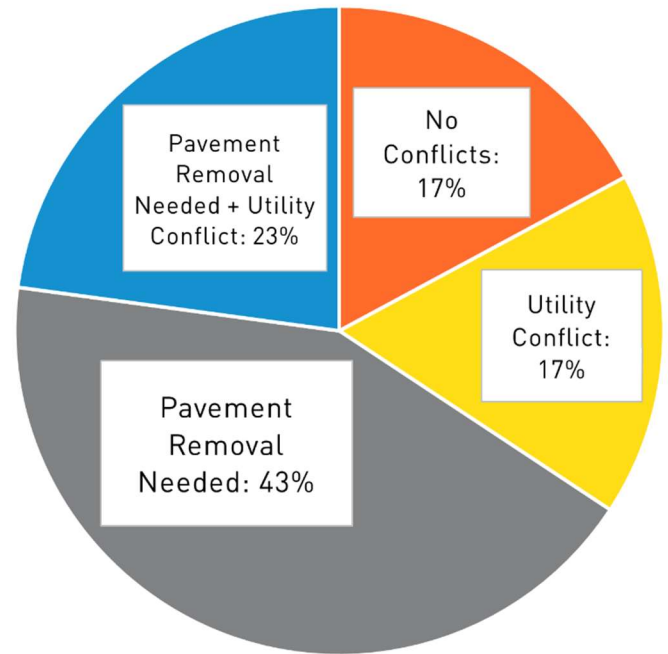
To increase the street tree canopy in this census tract, the city would need to address the following key challenges:

- Limited space: Capitol Hill/Olive Way is highly developed, leaving few open areas for new tree plantings.
- Utility conflicts: A high volume of underground pipes, overhead wires, and other utility infrastructure can limit where street trees can be planted. For example, an underground electrical vault in a planting strip would prevent planting street trees nearby.
- Pavement removal: In many locations, paved surfaces would need to be removed to create space for street trees.

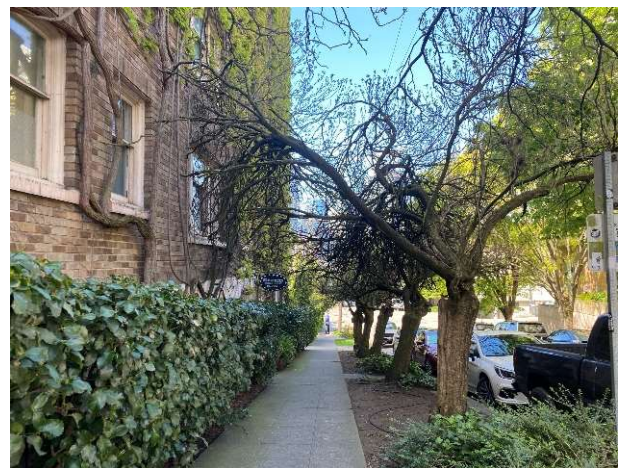
To overcome these barriers, the city is exploring solutions such as developing planting strips and removing unnecessary pavement. All efforts would comply with SDOT standards, which include:

- A minimum 5-foot-wide planting strip
- At least 25 feet between street trees
- Setbacks from driveways, poles, hydrants, and other infrastructure

These standards are designed to support healthy tree growth, reduce long-term maintenance issues, and help prevent damage to sidewalks and utilities. They also help ensure that public spaces remain safe, accessible, and functional for all users.



*Challenges to Planting Street Trees in Capitol Hill/Olive Way*



*Wide planting strips with shorter trees due to overhead power.*



*Underground utilities and narrow sidewalks without planting strips limit street tree planting.*

## WHAT WE HEARD

*"One of my favorite parts of Capitol Hill is Volunteer Park and the glorious old trees there and the surrounding neighborhood. But the rest of Capitol Hill seems sparse in the tree department and few are substantial or memorable."*

- Online Survey Respondent

In May 2025, SDOT asked people who live, work, or visit the Capitol Hill/Olive Way area to share their thoughts about street trees. The city gathered input from over 600 people through a pop-up table in the neighborhood, meetings with local groups, and an online survey.

### What we heard

#### Strong support for street trees

Community members strongly supported expanding the street tree program, valuing trees for their cooling effects, beauty, and bringing nature into the city. Many emphasized the need to prioritize tree equity in neighborhoods with low canopy coverage.

#### Tree species preferences

Native trees with the ability to soak up rainwater and support local wildlife were favored, while pollen-heavy species were not preferred due to allergy concerns.

#### Trees as cultural and creative features

Community members suggested using trees creatively with lights, art, and design that reflect neighborhood identity.

#### Safety and maintenance concerns

- Raised roots and sidewalk damage.
- Falling branches and dead trees.
- Lack of regular pruning, particularly around powerlines, lack of long-term care, especially for new plantings.
- Accessibility issues raised by people with mobility challenges.

#### Desire for education and support

Community members wanted better communication about tree programs and were willing to help if given tools, access to hoses for watering, and guidance.



#### Mixed views on parking removal for trees

While many community members supported more trees, some were hesitant about removing street parking. Others supported repurposing parking spaces for greenery due to low car ownership.

### What the survey showed

- 93% of respondents strongly support planting more street trees.
- Respondents expressed frustration with tree removal by developers and lack of follow-up care for newly planted trees. They requested better pruning, consistent tree maintenance, and care for new plantings.
- Over 50% raised safety concerns (e.g., root damage, falling branches) and 33% cited concerns about maintenance costs.
- Many were willing to volunteer for planting and care if provided with tools, access to watering and irrigation, and guidance.
- Renters noted barriers such as a lack of access to hoses for watering or outdoor space.
- Respondents wanted more outreach and communication from the city about tree programs and opportunities to get involved.

#### Most supported new planting strategies

Survey participants ranked potential solutions for creating more planting space:

1. Install sidewalks with planting strips – 86%
2. Remove pavement or compacted gravel – 85%
3. Remove on-street parking – 70%

# What future recommendations and outreach should we consider?

Based on community feedback, the following ideas reflect what community members hope the city will consider as it plans for a greener, more livable Capitol Hill/Olive Way:

## Tree protection and planting

- Preserve mature trees and explore root-sensitive methods to repair sidewalks.
- Consider prioritizing native species that support local wildlife and thrive in our regional climate.
- Avoid pollen-heavy species to reduce allergy impacts.
- Look into planting more established trees rather than small saplings and timing planting for the fall season to support root development.

## Maintenance and infrastructure

- Develop strategies for consistent inspection and long-term care for trees, especially for new plantings and street trees in high-traffic areas.
- Evaluate the use of permeable surfaces (such as cobblestones or bricks) around tree bases to improve water access and reduce flooding.
- Consider sidewalk and street redesigns that allow more space for trees, including wider walkways and traffic-calming features like traffic circles.
- Support for reclaiming space from cars for street tree planting.

## Community support and resources

- Explore ways to make tree care more accessible, such as providing tools, access to hoses for watering, or subsidies for residents, especially renters without outdoor access.
- Consider creating a reporting system for unhealthy or damaged trees to improve response and maintenance.

## Education and outreach

- Expand public education on tree benefits and care through signage, flyers, and community events.
- Encourage creative outreach—like tree tags, pop-up events with local businesses, and youth involvement—to build a sense of ownership and pride.
- Explore digital tools, such as a virtual “tree storybook” where residents can share memories and learn about neighborhood trees.

## Policy and program development

- Consider expanding existing programs like *Trees for Neighborhoods* and increasing right-of-way planting opportunities.
- Evaluate opportunities to strengthen tree replacement requirements for developers.
- Explore financial assistance programs to reduce barriers to tree planting and care.
- Coordinate city planning to ensure consistent species selection and long-term investment in tree infrastructure.

## HOW TO GET INVOLVED

SDOT is committed to growing our city’s tree canopy and creating greener, healthier neighborhoods.

Explore the Study: Learn about other neighborhoods included in SDOT’s [Street Tree Planning Study](#).

Plant a Tree: Visit [Trees for Neighborhoods](#) for free trees and planting resources in your community.

Learn about street trees: Visit the [Trees for Neighborhoods Street Trees](#) page for more information.

## Connect with SDOT

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