

# STREET TREE PLANNING STUDY

SODO | Census Tract 93.00

City Council District 1 & 2

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 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 SODO census tract. It includes results from an arborist assessment and from community engagement.

## What are street trees?

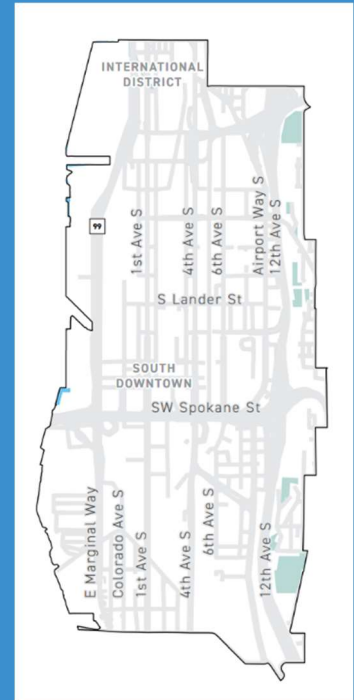


Street trees grow in public right-of-way—usually in planting strips between sidewalks and curbs—and are managed by SDOT. Street trees provide environmental, health, and social benefits, such as cooling neighborhoods and reducing air pollution.

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.

## SODO overview

Census Tract 93.00 is primarily located in Seattle's SODO neighborhood. This 2,345-acre area is bordered by Elliott Bay, S Jackson St, 13th Ave S, and S Dawson St., and includes residential areas in the International District and on Beacon Hill. This census tract is primarily zoned for industrial, manufacturing, and commercial/mixed-use purposes. Existing tree canopy coverage in SODO is 8.95%, which is less than the city's goal of 30%.



As of 2023, SODO is home to 3,364 residents. About 25% speak a language other than English. SODO has a majority male population (60%). The largest age group is 30–34 years old. Approximately 48% of residents are white, followed by 18.8% Asian, 13% multiracial, and 10.9% Hispanic.

## Equity and health snapshot

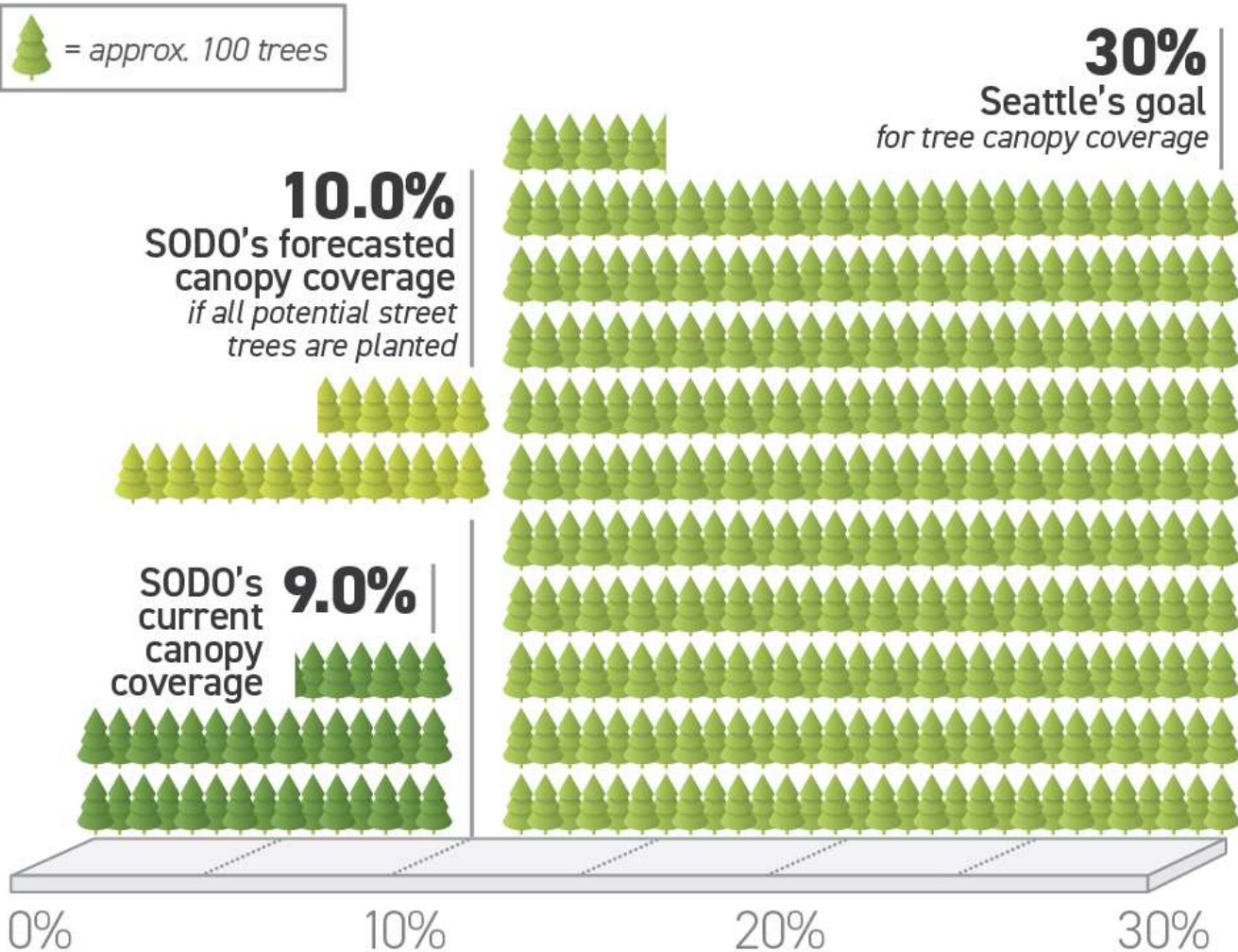
SODO is the city's largest heat island, largely due to its lack of tree canopy. The city uses a [Racial and Social Equity Index](#) tool to plan and prioritize investments throughout the city. Based on this index, SODO is considered a part of the Highest Equity Priority in Seattle across race, language, 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. SODO ranks high overall, particularly for traffic-related pollution, Particulate Matter (PM) 2.5, and toxic releases. PM 2.5 is small particle air pollution that enters the lungs and can cause serious health problems. SODO 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.

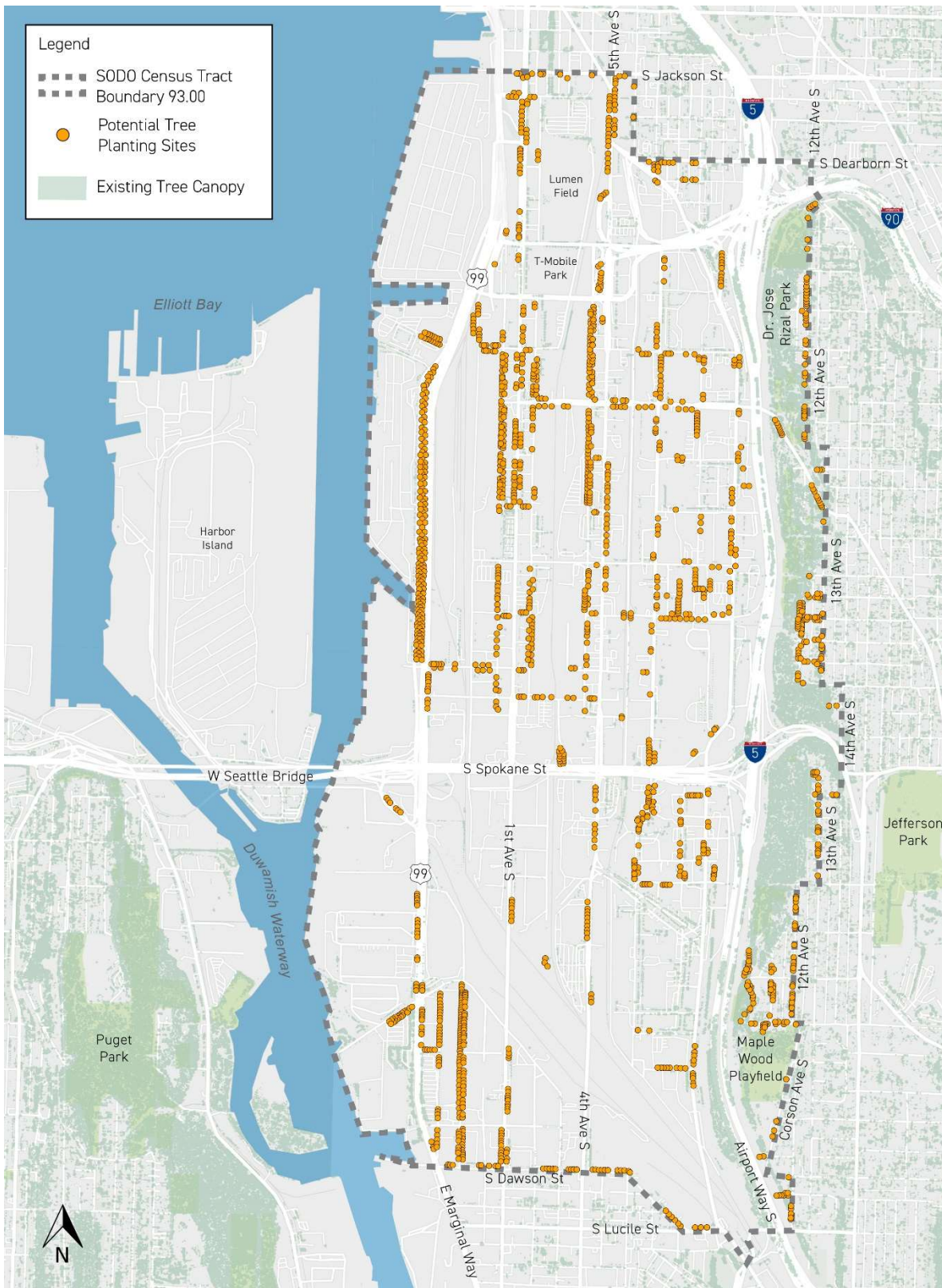
## Where can we put street trees in this census tract?

In a predominantly industrial neighborhood like SODO, every new street tree requires planning and coordination. SODO has only 8.95% tree canopy, which is lower than the city's goal of 30% tree canopy coverage. This gap is due in part to industrial development with large blocks and limited right-of-way for street trees. The city has identified potential street tree planting locations using mapping analysis and on-site inspections. In addition to 3,621 existing trees and 1,680 potential street tree planting locations, this census tract requires 28,738 more trees to reach the city's goal of 30%.

While 1,680 potential street trees represent only part of what's needed, each new street tree is progress toward our overall goal.







*Census Tract 93.00 – Existing Tree Canopy and Potential Street Tree Planting Locations*

## What are our existing challenges with street trees?

Space in SODO is limited and often already occupied by infrastructure, e.g. buildings, sidewalks, roads, utilities. Of the 1,680 potential street tree planting sites identified, only 21% could be planted today.

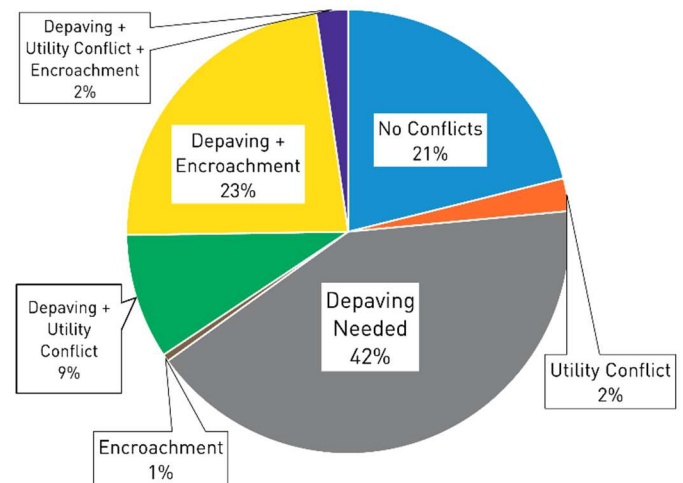
To increase the street tree canopy in this census tract, the city would need to address the following challenges:

- Limited space: SODO lacks sidewalks and planting strips in many areas. This census tract also has a high percentage of private encroachment in public right-of-way, such as fences and containers.
- 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 five-foot-wide planting strip
- At least 25 feet between street trees
- Setbacks from driveways, poles, hydrants, and other public 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 SODO*



*Lack of planting strips for street trees*

## WHAT WE HEARD

“There are more pros than there are cons (if any) to adding trees to SODO. This area is desperate for trees and has been for a long time.”

– *Online Survey Respondent*



In May 2025, SDOT asked people who work, live, or visit the SODO area to share their thoughts about street trees. The city gathered input from over 35 community members through a pop-up table in the neighborhood, meetings with local groups, and an online survey.

## What we heard

### Strong support for street trees

People expressed broad support for more street trees, citing benefits like shade, cooling, cleaner air, noise reduction, and a stronger sense of place. Many community members saw trees as essential for improving comfort, health, and equity in a heavily paved, industrial area.

### Urban heat, pollution, and livability

Community members described SODO as having high temperatures and elevated levels of pollution with minimal existing tree cover. Trees were seen as a way to soften the environment, make walking and biking more pleasant, and support mental well-being. Many people felt trees would help the area feel more welcoming and livable, especially as it grows.

### Design and maintenance

- Need for resilient species suited to poor soil and pollution.
- Issues with root damage to sidewalks and storm drains clogging.
- Risks near overhead utility lines.
- Desire for tree placement that protects people walking and biking from weather and traffic.
- Awareness of ongoing maintenance demands in a high-use area.

### Safety and freight mobility

- Trees can calm traffic and improve safety but need to be planned to avoid blocking freight sightlines.
- People in the community support slower, safer streets with thoughtful design.

### Desire for city-led efforts and educational support

People wanted the city to lead planting and maintenance, rather than relying on private property owners. Better public communication about tree programs was also requested.

## What the survey showed

- 91% of respondents strongly supported planting more street trees.
- Over 58% raised safety concerns (such as root damage and falling branches), 41% cited concerns about maintenance costs, and 25% worry about blocked views or access to sunlight, and 16% noted allergy concerns.
- Many respondents were willing to volunteer for planting and care; however, some people felt those actions should be the responsibility of the city's dedicated staff, and not property owners.
- Respondents noted that navigating the various tree programs can be overwhelming and want better outreach and communication from the city about tree programs and opportunities to get involved since they are not widely known.

### Most supported new planting strategies

Survey participants ranked potential solutions for creating more planting space:

1. Install sidewalks with planting strips – 90%
2. Remove pavement or compacted gravel – 90%
3. Remove on-street parking – 59%



# 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 SODO:

## Tree protection and planting

- Improve sidewalk planting sites to protect trees and account for root growth to enhance pedestrian safety.
- Design tree wells to prevent damage to sidewalks.
- Prioritize tree placement between traffic and walkways to improve safety for people walking or rolling.
- Avoid planting large trees under powerlines.
- Avoid pollen-heavy species to reduce allergy impacts.

## Maintenance and infrastructure

- Allocate dedicated staff and water trucks for ongoing tree care.
- Implement a smart watering program to monitor soil moisture and prevent overwatering.
- Add seating near trees to encourage public use and enjoyment.
- Widen sidewalks, reduce car lanes and parking, and increase width of planting strips.
- Add planters or stormwater runoff solutions.
- Utilize trees as a barrier between bike and walking paths, and the street.

## Community support and resources

- Partner with local sports teams, businesses, and property owners for tree planting solutions and stewardship.
- Collaborate with trusted neighborhood organizations to guide tree placement and care.

## Education and outreach

- Create a centralized city-wide webpage that consolidates all street tree programs offered by the city (SDOT, SPU, SCL, etc.).
- Host at least one annual in-person event with tree giveaways, care demonstrations, and resources.
- Distribute mailers to provide education on why street trees are important.

## Policy and program development

- Launch a program for businesses and developers to plant and maintain street trees.
- Develop a long-term maintenance and funding plan to ensure tree health and sustainability.

## 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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