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June 1, 2022

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RE: City’s 2023 Budget

Dear Mayor Bruce Harrell and Councilmembers,

Duwamish Lands (Seattle, WA) – As you begin to set the 2023 budget, the Urban Forest Commission (UFC) urges you to fund urban forestry positions and projects that will advance environmental justice, promote public health, and increase climate resilience in Seattle.

Recommendation 1: Create a system to track urban forestry-related expenditures in the budget

It is not currently possible to parse out all urban forestry-related expenditures from the City’s budgets. We do not know how many dollars the City spends per year to manage, maintain, restore, and educate about the urban forest. We do not know how the level of City investment in the urban forest trends from year to year or whether those funds are allocated where they can have the greatest benefit. We do know, that the urban forest provides millions of dollars of services to the City and residents and is valued in the billions of dollars. Do we resource the urban forest at a level commensurate with the benefits it provides? Without understanding the flow of urban forestry dollars, it is difficult to make informed investment decisions to improve outcomes for our urban forest. **Please create a system to track urban forestry-related expenditures.**

Recommendation 2: Fund projects that will help us make data-driven management decisions for the urban forest.

Data on Seattle’s urban forest is improving. Once results from the LiDAR tree canopy assessment are completed and shared, we will better understand how our tree canopy has changed over the last five years and where change is occurring. However, we continue to lack adequate tree-tracking data that

can help us understand the site-level decisions that affect tree removal and planting. We at the UFC often hear concerns from members of the public that trees are being lost on lots due to housing development. Simultaneously, we also have heard from developers that tree protection efforts will stymie development efforts aimed at increasing housing density and affordability. We know that protecting and growing the urban forest canopy and increasing the availability of affordable housing are goals that your administration shares with us.

We believe that we can move both issues forward more effectively if we have 1) a tree tracking system that tracks tree removal allowing analysis of when, where, and in what development situations trees are protected and retained versus removed and 2) a comprehensive tree planting plan. The City has set a goal to achieve 30% tree canopy cover by 2037, and 40% eventually. However, we do not know how many trees we need to plant each year to achieve those goals, nor where the potential planting space exists. We do not know how vulnerable our urban forest is to climate change. And we do not have an adequate understanding of the ecosystem service values of our urban forest.

In summary, the UFC requests the City to fund the following projects and assessments:

- **Action plans and maps to achieve the tree canopy cover of 30% per the 2037 goal.** The action plan should identify the potential canopy of Seattle given development and growth projections. It should establish planting targets and identify areas that can accept new trees.
- **Urban tree inventories.** Seattle Parks and Recreation, Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections, and Seattle Department of Transportation all have tree inventory projects. These inventories are critical baseline information and are currently incomplete, especially at SDCI.
- **A Natural Capital Assessment** of Seattle's green infrastructure and natural assets, would allow us to fully appreciate values the urban forest provides to community and give insight into how we can improve race and social justice in the city.
- **A climate change vulnerability assessment.** We need to assess how our urban forest may respond to climate change impacts and use the results to inform planning decisions now.

### Recommendation 3: Fund positions and projects that improve urban forest management and create new green career pathways

While we don't know the full level of investment in urban forestry management (see Recommendation 1), we know that on-the-ground resourcing is limited. For example, Seattle Parks and Recreation has just nine arborists to care for the approximately 500,000 trees in our parks. Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections has only two arborists to evaluate tree-related matters on private property, where an even larger number of Seattle's trees are rooted.

Given the high value of the urban forest and the roles it plays in environmental justice, public health, and climate resilience, increased funding for urban forestry positions is warranted.

The UFC recommends funding the following positions:

- **A new [Chief Forester](#) position and associated support staff.** The UFC believes the Office of Sustainability & Environment would be the appropriate agency to support this position. This

position would provide important oversight, coordination, and accountability for meeting the City's urban forest goals.

- **Urban forestry internships, apprenticeships, and jobs program.** This was identified as priority in the [2020 Urban Forest Management Plan](#) (page 33, Strategy 1, Action 1), with the rationale that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color want to participate in urban forestry and that the industry needs active change to diversify in both the public and private sector.
- **Administration and enforcement for improved tree protection regulations.** Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections administers SMC 25.11, Seattle's tree protection regulations. As noted above, SDCI resources for tree-related matters is extremely limited, especially given the large area under their jurisdiction. The City is in the process of updating tree protection regulations, and without additional funding for administration and enforcement, the regulations may not provide the intended improvements.
- **Administration of street tree maintenance, planting, and permits.** Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) manages a significant portion of the City's urban forest. SDOT Urban Forestry deserves funding increases for tree maintenance, planting, and administration.
- **Positions and funding for Green Seattle Partnership.** The Green Seattle Partnership is a recognized leader in urban forest restoration. Yet progress on its goals has been slowed in recent years due to reduced funding and the physical challenges of restoring the remaining un-enrolled acres, which now tend to be in steep slope areas and require professional restoration services. Supporting restoration professionals is increasingly important as the restoration field tends to rely on volunteer labor, which can diminish professional career opportunities.

### **Previous relevant UFC budget recommendations**

With the December 2020 briefing on **Seattle Parks and Recreation's Green Seattle Partnership**, with an update on the expected timeline of the program's restoration goals and proposed budget reduction, the UFC noted in its January 2021 letter, "The UFC is concerned that budget cuts will compound existing problems, including the loss of volunteer and contractor momentum due to the pandemic and the challenging conditions, such as steep slopes, of the remaining acres." Respectfully, the UFC repeats its recommendation to restore original funding levels to the Green Seattle Partnership.

With the June 2021 briefing regarding **Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) habitat management and restoration**, UFC noted in its July 2021 letter, "The UFC would like to see that these sites receive adequate funding such that they can maximize these benefits. These sites can potentially be expanded to support not only SPU's goals but also the goals of the Green New Deal, the Urban Forest Management Plan, the Climate Action Plan and potentially other programs."

With the July 2021 briefing from SPU on **urban heat island effects**, the UFC noted in its August 2021 letter that "We have worse tree protections, *less tree funding*, and non-existent tree tracking and data compared to even average urban forestry programs nationally, and we don't have a cohesive plan for how we will connect our canopy goals to existing planting efforts." Funding is needed for SLI SPU-002-A-001 in order for SPU to explore an expansion for the Tree Ambassador program as a cost-effective way to engage the public on trees and provide stewardship and maintenance of Seattle's canopy.

Also in July 2021 in response to the Statement of Legislative Intent MO-001-A-002, the Urban Forest Commission was tasked with reviewing the City's overall forestry management in the SLI MO-001-A-002. Specifically, "...evaluate models for **consolidating the City's urban forest management functions** and, based on this evaluation, make recommendations on how changes could be implemented." The UFC recommended we retain an independent consultant to review best practices for municipal urban forestry management structures. The UFC and staff would conduct deliberative sessions to share expertise and align recommendations to produce a coherent response to the SLI.<sup>1</sup>

With the September 2021 briefing on the **Seattle Parks and Recreation Strategic Plan**, the UFC noted in its October 2021 letter several items to be included in their Plan. The Plan now needs to be implemented, which is only possible with sufficient funding.

The UFC recognizes the challenging nature of the 2023 budget process and appreciates your consideration of these recommendations.

Sincerely,



David Moehring



Julia Michalak, Co-Chair



Joshua Morris, Co-Chair

cc: Marco Lowe, Akshay Iyengar, Jessyn Farrell, Michelle Caulfield, Sharon Lerman, Urban Forestry Management Team, Urban Forestry Core Team

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<sup>1</sup> In 2009, a City Auditor's [report](#) 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 times over the last 11 years, most recently in its [7/1/20 letter](#).