



**Becca Neumann** (Position #4 – Hydrologist), Co-chair  
**Joshua Morris** (Position #7 – NGO), Co-Chair  
**Laura Keil** (Position #10 – Get Engaged), Co-Chair  
**Julia Michalak** (Position #1 – Wildlife Biologist) • **Falisha Kurji** (Position #3 – Natural Resource Agency)  
**Stuart Niven** (Position #5 – Arborist – ISA) • **Hao Liang** (Position #6 – Landscape Architect – ISA)  
**David Moehring** (Position # 8 – Development) • **Blake Voorhees** (Position # 9 – Realtor)  
**Jessica Hernandez** (Position #11 – Environmental Justice) • **Jessica Jones** (Position # 12 – Public Health)  
**Lia Hall** (Position #13 – Community/Neighborhood)

January 4, 2023

Chanda Emery  
Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections  
700 5th Ave, Suite 2000  
Seattle, WA 98104

**RE: Urban Forestry Commission input regarding the current Urban Forest Protection Ordinance**

Dear Chanda,

Duwamish Lands (Seattle, WA) – The Urban Forestry Commission (UFC) thanks you for your December 7, 2022, briefing regarding the status of the tree and urban forest protection ordinance update (SMC 25.11).

You shared that you and your colleagues reviewed and considered all recommendations from the UFC, as well as from many other stakeholders. The UFC acknowledges and appreciates the time invested in reviewing community input.

The UFC would support the changes as enumerated during your briefing, though the Commission reserves its endorsements until the full text of the revised draft is available. The UFC's summary of the proposed changes shared at the December 7 meeting are at the bottom of this letter. While the UFC believes the revisions that you shared would improve the ordinance, **the City must be bolder in its efforts to protect and enhance tree canopy.**

With the results from the updated tree canopy assessment in hand, it is clear that the current regulatory, financial, and educational structures in place for urban forest governance in Seattle are not sufficient to achieve the City's stated canopy goals. Worse, they appear to have perpetuated a harmful legacy of disproportionately failing Seattle's most disadvantaged communities.

The 2021 canopy assessment shows that **Seattle's urban forest is in decline**. Between 2016 to 2021, the city saw a net loss of 255 acres of canopy. Tree loss occurred everywhere, across all land use types. But the most disadvantaged communities experienced relative canopy losses eight-fold greater than the least disadvantaged communities (-4.1% and -0.5% respectively).

**Our best chance to reverse canopy loss and address tree canopy inequity is right now.** The UFC repeats its calls to further strengthen the tree code by:

- Reducing tree removal allowances outside of development;
- Increasing tree replacement requirements;
- Requiring tree inventories and tree landscape plans for development projects; and
- Emphasizing that maximizing tree retention is a goal and expectation of new development.

This is not a comprehensive list of recommendations, just a few reiterations of some of the recommendations that the UFC considers important related to recent updates to the ordinance.

- Reduce tree removal allowances outside of development.

The revised draft ordinance will maintain a high tree removal allowance outside of development—up to three trees per year that are not exceptional and are significant trees between 6 and 12” DSH.

The City’s justification for maintaining high tree removal allowances is to “maintain flexibility for people to have a garden or to increase solar access on private property.”

Given the state of our urban forest, the UFC believes this rationale is weak and the policy unwise. **An allowance of two trees every three years, as the UFC has called for, would provide sufficient flexibility in many instances.** If greater flexibility is required, the department could allow departures for additional removal.

- Require a higher tree replacement ratio.

The revised draft ordinance will maintain a one-to-one tree replacement requirement, where upon maturity a replacement tree must provide a canopy cover “roughly proportional” to the lost tree.

Given the slow growth of trees, a one-to-one canopy cover replacement requirement is insufficient to replace the benefits of lost trees. The City’s own policy is two-for-one replacement, and **the UFC believes an inch-for-inch replacement requirement is warranted.** Higher replacement ratios will help tree planting and tree growth keep pace with inevitable tree loss.

- Require tree inventories and tree landscaping plans for development projects.

The City can improve urban forest management by improving data collection on trees during the development process.

Tree inventories are one of the best ways to understand the composition, characteristics, and distribution of trees in our urban forest. This information can direct future care decisions, including pest readiness responses. For example, if we know where ash trees grow across Seattle, we can begin to estimate the potential consequences and costs if and when the emerald ash borer begins to infect trees.

**The UFC urges the City to require developers to complete a tree inventory and tree landscaping plan prior to granting building permits.**

The proposed draft update to SMC 25.11 would maintain the requirement for developers to identify all exceptional trees on site plans and adds a requirement to identify significant trees 12" DSH or greater. **The UFC urges the City to expand the inventory requirement to include all exceptional trees and significant trees 6" DSH or greater.** The tree inventory information from site plans should be entered into an Accela database that can be queried by other City departments.

The UFC notes that identifying all significant trees 6" DSH or greater also brings SMC 25.11 into alignment with SMC 23.22, which currently requires trees 6" DSH or greater to be identified on site plans during platting/subdivision.

The UFC also urges the City to require tree landscaping plans prior to granting permits. The plans should indicate any significant or exceptional trees expected to be removed as well as the developer's plans for tree loss mitigation, whether through onsite replanting, off-site replanting, or payment in lieu of replacement.

Tree inventories and tree landscaping plans will help provide clarity and certainty to developers, can save time and costs if disputes over trees arise in subsequent stages of the process, and will be helpful to SDCI's quarterly reports to council on administration of SMC 25.11, which the UFC understands is under consideration.

- Emphasize that maximizing tree retention is a goal and expectation of new development.

Maximizing tree retention is a criterion for approval in the platting process under SMC 23.24.040 A.7. Why would the City drop this expectation at subsequent stages of the development process? **The UFC urges the City to emphasize in SMC 25.11 that maximizing tree retention is a goal and expectation of new development in the City of Seattle.**

Retaining our existing trees is an essential strategy for ensuring Seattle is resilient to climate change and that our urban forest can meet the needs of future generations.

The UFC thanks you and your colleagues for your work to improve protections for Seattle's largest and most valuable natural asset. The Commission looks forward to continuing this conversation with SDCI, the City Council, and the Mayor's office. The UFC requests that the updated draft of the ordinance be shared with us as soon as possible.

Sincerely,



Josh Morris, Co-Chair



Becca Neumann, Co-Chair

Summary of proposed changes to the draft tree and urban forest protection ordinance shared by Chanda Emory, SDCI, at Dec. 7, 2022 meeting:

The UFC was pleased to learn that the revised draft tree and urban forest protection ordinance will include the following UFC recommendations:

- Require five-year establishment period for replacement trees;
- Ensure adequate soil volume for replacement trees, especially those planted in the right-of-way;
- Legally protect replacement trees; and
- Adjusted payment-in-lieu structure to include replacement tree maintenance costs over the five-year establishment period.

The UFC also heard that SDCI is considering and would support:

- Mitigation for removal of hazardous trees;
- Trebled penalties when trees are removed illegally to improve views or increase development potential of a lot; and
- Submitting quarterly reports to the Office of Sustainability and Environment on tree removal and replacement

CC: Nathan Torgelson, Mike Podowski

Patti Bakker, Urban Forestry Commission Coordinator  
City of Seattle, Office of Sustainability & Environment  
PO Box 94729 Seattle, WA 98124-4729 Tel: 206-684-3194  
[www.seattle.gov/UrbanForestryCommission](http://www.seattle.gov/UrbanForestryCommission)