

# Seattle Urban Forestry Commission

Tom Early, Chair • Steve Zemke, Vice-Chair  
Weston Brinkley • Leif Fixen • Reid Haefer • Craig Johnson • Donna Kostka • Richard Martin  
Joanna Nelson de Flores • Andrew Zellers

April 5, 2017

Mayor Edward B. Murray and Councilmember Sally Bagshaw  
Seattle City Hall  
600 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue  
Seattle, WA 98124

RE: Seattle City Light and Seattle Department of Transportation tree pruning.

Dear Mayor Murray and Councilmember Bagshaw,

The Urban Forestry Commission was established to advise the Mayor and City Council on policy and regulations governing the protection, management and conservation of trees and vegetation in the City of Seattle. The Commission's work supports the City's goal of achieving 30% tree canopy cover by 2037.

The purpose of this letter is to make two related recommendations concerning Seattle City Light's (SCL's) and the Seattle Department of Transportation's (SDOT's) tree pruning work. As you may know, SCL and SDOT are responsible for pruning trees in the city's right-of-way. First, during a briefing last year the Commission learned about a budget reduction for SCL that resulted in a change in pruning cycles from four to five years. The Commission recommends maintaining funding levels to support a four-year pruning cycle. Second, the Commission also recommends that the City examine (or direct SCL and SDOT to examine) opportunities for better coordination and efficiency between their tree pruning work. Explanation for our recommendations follows:

Regular tree pruning provides public safety, e.g., removal of diseased branches at risk of falling in public areas. Regular tree pruning is also critical for maintaining the health of the City's urban forest. SCL is responsible for maintaining clearance between street trees and overhead power lines and facilities. Maintaining SCL's current tree pruning cycle at four years will prevent SCL from having to prune street trees more aggressively to account for a longer pruning cycle, a step that would negatively affect the health of the city's street trees and the aesthetics of the right-of-way. For these reasons – namely, to preserve current public safety standards and the health of the city's street trees – the Commission recommends that the City maintains funding levels to support a SCL four-year pruning cycle.

As noted above, SCL and SDOT are responsible for pruning trees in the right-of-way. SCL's work is limited to pruning the canopy to maintain a safe clearance between street trees and overhead power lines and facilities. SDOT's work is limited to pruning the canopy to maintain a safe clearance between street trees and vehicles and pedestrians below. SCL tree crews and SDOT tree crews do not coordinate their tree pruning work, even though their tree pruning work is interrelated and dependent. For example, state law and best management practices require that certain street trees be "made ready" by SCL, meaning that SCL performs power-line-clearance pruning in advance so SDOT can prune the lower canopy. Based on discussions and tours with SCL and SDOT, and comment from the public, the Commission believes there

are opportunities for SCL and SDOT to better coordinate their tree pruning work and to deliver improved efficiency and, perhaps, cost savings to the City. The Commission recommends that the City examine (or direct SCL and SDOT to examine) such opportunities and institute a program for better coordination moving forward.

In sum, the Commission respectfully recommends that (i) the City maintain and fund SCL's tree pruning cycle at four years and (ii) the City examine (or direct SCL and SDOT to examine) opportunities and a program for better coordination of their tree pruning work. Doing so will maintain or improve public safety standards, the health of the City's street trees and the cost, quality, and efficiency of street tree maintenance. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,



Tom Early, Chair

cc: Council President Harrell, Councilmember Burgess, Councilmember Gonzalez, Councilmember Herbold, Councilmember Johnson, Councilmember Juarez, Councilmember O'Brien, Councilmember Sawant, Jessica Finn Coven, Larry Weis, Scott Kubly, Michelle Caulfield, Michelle Vargo, Rodney Maxie, Darren Morgan, David Bayard, Dionne Foster, Aaron Blumenthal, Eric McConaghy.