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Subject: 2024 Budget Recommendations and Considerations for Urban Forestry in Seattle

Dear Seattle City Councilmembers,

Adequate funding is essential for good urban forest governance. Given our declining canopy, worsening canopy inequities, and the looming challenges from climate change and biodiversity loss, Seattle's investments in its urban forest are not yet sufficient.

As you begin to turn your attention to the 2024 City Budget, the Urban Forestry Commission (UFC) makes these initial recommendations to address critical needs for our urban forest:

1. **Allocate \$200,000 in 2024 to support the Tree Canopy Equity and Resilience plan.** In 2023, the City allocated \$150,000 in one-time funding for a Tree Canopy Equity and Resilience Plan. Conducting the robust community engagement desired as the plan is developed will require additional consultant and research support.

This is a key investment for the city, as this will be the first citywide plan for how we will achieve our canopy goals that the city has developed. The Tree Canopy Equity and Resilience Plan will identify the best strategies and locations for planting, growing, and maintaining trees on private and public land and in the right-of-way, with a focus on low-canopy neighborhoods in environmental justice priority areas. It will also support the City in finding future federal, state, and philanthropic funds that support the resilience of the tree canopy.

The City of Philadelphia recently released a similar [plan](#), including a process that involved robust community development. That planning project had a budget of \$315,000. The team from the City of Philadelphia who developed this Plan will present to the UFC on September 20 about this planning process. The UFC would like to invite Councilmembers to attend that presentation.

2. **Provide additional support for the UFC's community engagement work**

The UFC struggles with lack of funding to equitably engage with community members. Additional staff support is needed to help facilitate this work, as well as a fund to use for stipends for inviting guest speakers, booking community spaces, etc. Some of this additional funding could also support capacity for UFC to enhance community engagement work associated with the Canopy Equity and Resilience Plan.

The UFC recommends providing \$5,000 to support the UFC's community engagement work, and increasing staff support to one full-time employee.

3. **Increase urban forestry-qualified staff capacity at Seattle Department of Construction and Inspection.** The updated tree protection ordinance establishes new processes at SDCI and adds requirements for development permit applicants. This will increase workloads relating to tree regulations. With only two arborists on staff, SDCI is already critically under-resourced with regard to arboricultural expertise.

The UFC recommends adding at least two additional full-time urban forestry staff at SDCI in 2024, including at least one Code Compliance Inspector who is an Arborist.

4. **Allocate additional funds to meet City's increased tree replacement obligations.** [Executive Order 2023-03](#) – One Seattle Tree Plan (EO) increased the City's tree replacement and maintenance obligations. This will create ongoing additional expenses for the City that were not included in the 2023-2024 biennial budget.

The UFC recommends that the Council request each department to provide counts of past healthy, site-appropriate trees removed and counts of dead, hazardous, or invasive trees removed. This will could provide a basis for projecting tree replacement budgets.

The EO requires that for each healthy tree removed, three replacement trees be planted. For each dead, hazardous, or invasive tree, two replacement trees are required.

The UFC recommends allocating additional funds for departments required to replace trees, at a level appropriate for the department. For instance, SDOT estimates of five-year planting and establishment costs are \$2,705 per tree. In 2022, SDOT removed 181 trees (Bean 2023). Depending on the condition of the trees, this would require between 362 to 543 replacement trees. The first-year replacement cost would be between \$440,000 and \$660,000 for this single department alone. The cost estimates for planting and establishment of trees in other departments are different. For example, SPR's estimate for tree planting and establishment is greater (\$4,000 per tree) due to more difficult access, etc. Therefore, the cost per department required to do this additional planting could exceed the estimate above. These cost estimates should be updated on a biennial cycle to account for rising costs in resources, maintenance and labor.

5. **Fund urban forest community engagement.** The health of our urban forest depends to a large extent on stewardship by tree service providers and individual property owners. The UFC recommends investing in community engagement to increase community care and concern for trees on private and public property, as well as to hear concerns and questions from community and to communicate about the recent changes to our tree regulations.

The 2020 Urban Forest Management Plan update included in its Action Agenda, a prioritized action to “create a citywide urban forestry communication strategy that will identify better ways to share information with environmental equity communities about volunteer opportunities,

tree care information, regulations, incentives, and winter storms. This strategy should have a special emphasis on Native American communities.”

The UFC recommends as a step toward increasing community engagement providing \$50,000 of funding to OSE to enable the new City Urban Forester position to work with a consultant, in collaboration with the community, on developing the Communication Strategy called for in the 2020 Urban Forest Management Plan update.

6. Fund a Natural Capital Assessment

There is a need for the city to understand the dollar value of the city’s natural assets. There was funding in the 2020 City budget for the city to develop a Natural Capital Assessment, but that funding was pulled back due to pandemic needs. This assessment is still needed.

The UFC recommends providing \$50,000 for this assessment to be completed.

7. Fund adequate monitoring and evaluation of the updated tree protection ordinance. It is essential for the city to monitor and evaluate the impact of the recent update to the tree protection ordinance. As the UFC included in previous recommendations, some of the updates are novel and the potential consequences are unclear. The UFC recommends adding funding in 2024 to support robust monitoring and evaluation of the new tree protection ordinance, including:

- The use by permit applicants of payment in-lieu of tree replacement. A report should include the number of permit applicants that used the payments, payment amounts, total payments collected, City costs related to tree planting and establishment, and any recommendations for changes to the payment amounts to be included in a revised Director’s Rule. Recommendations for changes to fee amounts shall include consideration of adequacy of payment amount to replace removed trees, cover City planting and establishment costs, and effects of payment amount on permit applicant decisions about usage of the payment option.
- The use by permit applicants of development standard flexibility to preserve trees. A report should include the number of permit applicants that take advantage of allowed departures from development standards to accommodate tree preservation. A report should include the types of departures used and the number of trees preserved therefrom, as well as the number of trees removed. Species, size, and other information about tree preservation, removal, and replacement shall also be reported. Recommendations for changes to the development standard departures shall include consideration for adequacy of tree preservation, adequate incentives to builders, and effects of hardscape allowance on tree preservation, replanting, and development processes.
- The number and location of replacement trees planted offsite. A report should include descriptions, statistics, and qualitative reports about required replacement trees planted offsite, both through direct replacement by developers or by City efforts funded

by the One Seattle tree fund. A report should include information on costs, survivability, and community reception and feedback.

- Identification of unintended consequences. A report should include an assessment of any unintended consequences arising from the implementation of this ordinance, including but not limited to inequitable canopy impacts on Environmental Justice communities; disincentivized tree ownership, stewardship, or proactive management; impacts to the livelihoods of urban forest professionals; and cost and time to developers.
- Recommendations on how this legislation can support the strategies in the forthcoming Tree Canopy Equity and Resilience Plan.
- Reporting on impacts to the urban forest due to climate change including from pests, pathogens, and insects.
- Examination of code's alignment with urban forest management best practices and national standards.

The UFC is happy to meet with you or your staff to discuss budget considerations for urban forestry.

Sincerely,

References

Bean, Katey. "SDOT Urban Forestry March 2023 Briefing to the Urban Forestry Commission." March 1, 2023. Available at

[https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/UrbanForestryCommission/2023/2023Docs/SDOTUF Presentation030123.pdf](https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/UrbanForestryCommission/2023/2023Docs/SDOTUF%20Presentation030123.pdf)