

Response to 2021 Statement of Legislative Intent on Urban Forestry Consolidation

Introduction

City Council Statement of Legislative Intent (SLI) [MO-001-A-002](#) requests that “the Executive, Urban Forestry Commission (UFC), and Urban Forestry Interdepartmental Team 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 City’s Urban Forestry staff teams worked together with the Mayor’s Office to consider the best approaches to answering these questions, given the limited staff capacity for this work and competing department priorities. The first stage of our approach was to review the existing urban forest management functions across departments – a necessary step to evaluate the current model against other potential models, as the SLI requests. This memo provides a summary of the existing urban forest management structure, and the benefits of this structure. However, given limited staff capacity these teams did not have the time, resources, or expertise to fully assess other potential models or make a recommendation on whether any changes should be made to the City’s current urban forest management structure.

Process

As directed in the SLI, staff have consulted with the Mayor’s Office and have had initial conversations with the UFC. Urban forestry staff teams have worked during this year on this request, with the UF Core Team meeting on a biweekly basis for several months, during which staff unpacked the complexities of undertaking this work. The UFC submitted a letter of recommendation regarding this SLI to the Mayor and Council on July 15th, which includes a recommendation to hire a consultant to help complete this work.

Background

Overview of existing urban forest management structure

The City currently uses an “integrated” approach to urban forestry management, which involves coordinating relevant departments’ bodies of urban forestry work through interdepartmental groups while allowing each department to execute and administer its own programs independently. This approach has allowed urban forestry goals to be considered in the context of a wide range of policies and projects, and ensures that a diversity of professions and considerations are incorporated into and contribute to the improvement of urban forestry work.

Currently, nine City departments have responsibilities related to urban forestry – seven with urban forestry as a core part of their responsibilities, and two with more tangential urban forestry responsibilities. The list below outlines these responsibilities; a more complete listing of department responsibilities can be found in Appendix A.

- OSE has an overall policy and coordinating role and leads:

- Updates to the Urban Forest Management Plan
- Coordination and monitoring of the citywide urban forestry Trees for Seattle annual work plans
- Two-for-One tree replacement policy tracking, and reporting; and
- Urban Forestry Commission staffing.
- OPCD stewards the City’s comprehensive plan which includes broad policy direction for managing the urban forest.
- SDOT regulates and maintains street trees by working with landowners to ensure adequate maintenance of shared-responsibility right-of-way trees and by planting and caring for street trees.
- FAS, Seattle Center, SPR and SPU manage the trees on their properties, which includes work to maintain trees (pruning, watering, planting), record and track tree data, incorporate urban forest perspectives into campus and facility plans, and development of department tree-related policies.
- SDCI has a regulatory role for trees on private property, implementing code regulations and ensuring tree-related requirements are met during development review processes.
- SCL prunes trees around power lines to maintain safety and reliability of the utility system.
- SPU manages trees on their property, houses the Trees for Seattle citywide brand and public engagement program, and integrates trees and urban nature into their green infrastructure approach to drainage.

Recent improvements in coordination

The current structure of the City’s integrated approach to urban forest management was developed through deep collaboration between executives, managers, and staff in relevant City departments and the Mayor’s Office over the past 12 years to respond to recommendations in a 2009 report from the City Auditor aimed at strengthening implementation of the City’s Urban Forest Management Plan.

In 2009, City Council asked the Office of the City Auditor to review the City’s management of its trees. In response, they published [recommendations](#) to strengthen implementation of the City’s Urban Forest Management Plan. A follow up [2011 report](#) from the Office of the City Auditor showed that most of the 2009 recommendations had been implemented, including those related to improving interdepartmental coordination (actions #166-170 and 172-175).¹

To implement one of the key recommendations in the auditor’s report, in October 2016, Mayor Murray issued a [Directive](#) on a “New urban forestry coordination structure to enhance urban forestry services.” The Executive established OSE as the lead facilitator of this work, accountable to the Mayor’s Office for performance monitoring and tracking outcomes. In response OSE, in collaboration with the City’s urban forestry departments, brought numerous existing programs together under the Trees for Seattle umbrella, the overarching initiative for the City’s urban forestry work. City departments collaborated to

¹ The only actions still pending are related to the tree regulations update, included in the report as actions #163 and 164, an effort that is currently underway.

create a [Trees for Seattle Charter](#) which clarifies the goals, structure, responsibilities, and membership of the different groups responsible for urban forestry work. The charter's updated structure established a Management Team that meets quarterly, a Core Team that meets monthly, and an Interdepartmental Team (IDT) that meets quarterly. These groups work together to strengthen Seattle's urban forest and elevate any issues to Department Directors and the Mayor's Office as needed.

The updated structure also included the Trees for Seattle Engagement Team, an interdepartmental program housed in SPU and supported across the Urban Forest Core Team member departments. This team runs interdepartmental communications channels such as the monthly e-newsletter, social media, and website which share information such as announcements regarding the Trees for Neighborhoods program, upcoming events, and updates on special projects like the Urban Forest Management Plan update. This team also leads special projects such as community engagement around the update of the Urban Forest Management Plan and interdepartmental events such as Arbor Day, MLK Day of Service, and Earth Day, and manages the Trees for Neighborhoods residential planting program and Tree Ambassador volunteer program. These engagement efforts represent collaboration across departments to partner with the community in support of all departments' urban forestry related needs.

Benefits of current approach

The current integrated approach for managing trees offers several benefits. In-house urban forestry professionals and arborists bring tree advocacy and specialization to help resolve department-specific tree issues. Also, tree planting and maintenance by the City is funded through many funding sources (General Fund, Commercial Parking Tax, Gas Tax, REET, Levy, Grants, Capital budgets, rate payer funds, and leveraged private dollars), and each department has unique labor and funding requirements that must be managed when performing tree work.

There are several other positive factors of this current integrated approach with centralized coordination:

- Urban forestry staff benefit from support structures internal to each department (HR, Customer Care, IT/OT, communications, compliance, etc.)
- The different types of urban forestry functions that exist across departments, while connected in some ways, are diverse and individually complex enough that they benefit from specialization. These functions generally include:
 - **Operations and Maintenance.** Planting, establishment, maintenance, pruning, and removal of trees and other landscaping both as part of and outside of capital projects. For instance, the maintenance goals for trees in SPR lands and in Seattle Center, as highly-used public use spaces, are different from the goals for trees on SCL and SPU lands, where functions of utility assets are a concern.
 - **Regulatory.** Review and permitting of capital and development projects on private land, public land, and the right-of-way. There are different regulatory considerations and processes for trees in each of these jurisdictional responsibilities.
 - **Planning and Policy.** Creating and updating plans and policy documents that guide other aspects of our work. The ways in which trees are managed in relation to other department

work vary widely across departments. For instance, trees are an integral part of many park landscapes managed by SPR, so SPR's tree policies will look different from other departments.

- **Public Engagement.** Involving community (with a focus on BIPOC communities) in all aspects of our work in order to build and maintain relationships and trust, provide education, volunteer opportunities, and incentives. Here again, the needs in these areas vary widely across departments.
- **Internal coordination:** Coordinating efforts across City departments and their divisions.

Current Citywide Policy & Planning Framework

The City's [Urban Forest Management Plan](#) (UFMP), which was recently updated, provides a framework for policy and action that guides city government decision-making to help Seattle maintain, preserve, enhance, and restore its urban forest. This framework was informed by an inclusive public engagement process. The core of the plan is a set of outcomes, strategies, actions, and indicators that will support a healthy and sustainable urban forest across Seattle's publicly and privately owned land. Additionally, it identifies potential opportunities and strategies the City could pursue to improve our urban forestry work if additional funding were available. It is important to note that assessing the effectiveness of the current approach to urban forestry management is not one of the priorities identified through the recent UFMP update process. The UFMP [Executive Summary](#) provides an overview of the outcomes, strategies, actions, and budget priorities as outlined in the UFMP.

Recommendation

Before beginning to explore the mechanics of consolidation, as requested by the SLI, the City should first consider whether a new approach to urban forest management would be advisable. As noted above, the current model was developed over many years through a thorough and deliberate process. There are other models employed by municipalities such as Portland that deserve consideration, one of which is consolidation or "centralization," but there is no one best practice model. Evaluating models to ensure optimal urban forestry coordination across a diverse range of activities, skills, departments, land types, and job classifications is a significant undertaking due to scope and size of the work necessary.

Engaging in a full and careful exploration of alternate models and the benefits and challenges of such models for Seattle would require, at minimum:

- interviews with staff and leadership in a variety of City departments to examine their goals, work streams, and needs with an overarching organizational lens;
- a review of peer cities' urban forestry structures, with an eye towards lessons learned and successful practices;
- development of alternative models for the City to consider, including benefits and tradeoffs given the unique needs and structures of Seattle, an assessment of the labor and workforce impacts of each model, and projections of long-term costs of each model and upfront costs of making any changes; and
- a thorough, inclusive process to review and consider these potential options.

The Urban Forestry Commission has suggested, in their July 15th letter, funding a consultant to review best practices for municipal urban forestry management structures. The City agrees that existing staff alone do not have the capacity or expertise to take on this project, but suggests careful consideration of the potential benefits of such an assessment against the likely costs and the significant staff time that would be dedicated to this effort, which would take staff away from other critical urban forestry work such as continuing to execute the Urban Forest Management Plan, advance the ongoing tree regulations update within SDCI, and continue other existing workplan priorities.

Absent this type of careful, full, consultant-led exploration of the potential benefits, drawbacks, and upfront and long-term costs of different models, the City's urban forestry team does not recommend making changes to the current urban forestry structure.

Thank you for your interest in Seattle's tree canopy. We look forward to working with you as we continue to advance the City's tree-related work over the coming months and years.

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**Appendix A
Urban Forestry Responsibilities by Department**

<p>Finance and Administrative Services (FAS)</p>	<p>FAS manages properties and facilities owned or leased by the City, including Seattle Fire Department, Seattle Police Department, City government office buildings, sites housing City construction/heavy maintenance vehicles, and other buildings throughout the community. FAS’ goal is to preserve as many trees as possible and to create sustainably landscaped areas while ensuring public and property via proper tree planting, maintenance, and pruning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comply with the City’s Two-for-One Tree Replacement Policy and report numbers quarterly to OSE • Participate in the City’s Urban Forest Interdepartmental Team
<p>Office of Planning and Community Development (OPCD)</p>	<p>OPCD is responsible for stewarding the City’s Comprehensive Plan, which includes broad policy direction for managing the urban forest.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create broad policies for management of Seattle’s urban forest • Support integration of urban forestry into other initiatives • Participate in the City’s Urban Forestry Core Team and Management Teams
<p>Office of Sustainability and Environment (OSE)</p>	<p>OSE leads policy development, coordination, and reporting for city-wide urban forestry issues and initiatives. OSE staffs the Urban Forestry Commission, convenes urban forestry interdepartmental teams, supports the Green Seattle Partnership, and triages the TreesForSeattle@Seattle.gov email address.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate departmental urban forestry work coordination (Core, Management, and interdepartmental teams) prioritizing support to BIPOC communities • Manage TreesForSeattle@seattle.gov email and triage public inquiries • Track and report data from departmental compliance with the City’s Two-for-One Tree Replacement Policy • Produce the Trees for Seattle annual progress report • Staff Urban Forestry Commission • Participate in Green Seattle Partnership Management Team and Executive Council

<p>Seattle Center</p>	<p>Seattle Center manages trees on its 74-acre campus. It hosts hundreds of community events and three major festivals each year.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comply with the City’s Two-for-One Tree Replacement Policy and report numbers quarterly to OSE • Participate in the City’s Urban Forest Interdepartmental Team
<p>Seattle City Light (SCL)</p>	<p>SCL is responsible for ensuring safe and reliable power delivery through the comprehensive and environmentally responsible management of the trees and vegetation that their lines and infrastructure impact. SCL maintains the Urban Tree Replacement Program that works closely with the City’s Trees for Seattle program and its Trees for Neighborhoods program.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prune trees away from power lines, and manage vegetation on Transmission rights-of-way and SCL-owned facilities for safety and reliability of the electrical grid • Support residents with SCL-led tree planting efforts • Comply with the City’s Two-for-One Tree Replacement Policy and report numbers quarterly to OSE • Participate in the City’s Urban Forestry Core Team, Management, and Interdepartmental Teams
<p>Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI)</p>	<p>SDCI develops regulations for land use, including the Shoreline Master Program; Building, Electrical, Energy, and Mechanical Codes; Housing & Building Maintenance Code, including rental housing; and Environmental Protection and Historic Preservation Code, including tree protection and environmentally critical areas codes. SDCI services include permit review and enforcement of the above regulations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review permits and enforce tree protection regulations on private property • Implement Executive Order 2017-11: Tree Protection • Finalize Exceptional Tree Director’s Rule update • Develop tree tracking protocol and system for trees in and trees out during permitting • Explore strategies as outlined in Resolution 31902 that center and prioritize BIPOC communities in culturally relevant ways • Make recommendations to Chair of Council’s Land Use and Neighborhoods Committee on overall options to pursue • Participate in the City’s Urban Forestry Core Team, Management, and Interdepartmental Teams

<p>Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT)</p>	<p>SDOT is responsible for the management of trees in the right-of-way (street trees), including design, installation, and stewardship of trees and landscapes associated with public right-of-way and permitting of actions that could impact these trees. SDOT maintains over 40,000 street trees and regulates planting and maintenance of another 200,000 street trees. SDOT works closely with Trees for Seattle and its Tree Ambassador program. SDOT manages the City’s (206) 684-TREE (8733) phone line.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inventory street trees throughout the city • Plant and maintain street trees throughout Seattle prioritizing BIPOC communities • Explore options to solve street tree and sidewalk conflicts to comply with ADA requirements • Comply with the City’s Two-for-One Tree Replacement Policy and report numbers quarterly to OSE • Participate in the City’s Urban Forestry Core Team, Management, and Interdepartmental Teams
<p>Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR)</p>	<p>SPR manages trees in over 6,400 acres of developed parks, boulevards, natural areas, and other publicly owned open spaces, including about 100,000 trees in developed parks and over 585,000 trees in the forested areas of parks.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comply with the City’s Two-for-One Tree Replacement Policy and report numbers quarterly to OSE • Participate in the City’s Urban Forestry Core Team, Management, and Interdepartmental Teams • Plant and maintain trees in SPR properties prioritizing BIPOC communities • Restore forested parklands through the Green Seattle Partnership with a focus on BIPOC communities • Address forest health issues resulting from impacts such as invasive pests and climate change
<p>Seattle Public Utilities (SPU)</p>	<p>SPU is responsible for providing functional, healthy, and reliable drinking water, surface water, stormwater, groundwater, wastewater, and solid waste services. SPU maintains trees on the property it owns, and actively plants trees to meet drainage, capital project, and riparian habitat needs. SPU supports several programs that promote healthy urban forests including the City’s Trees for Seattle program, Green Seattle Partnership, and the Green Stormwater Infrastructure program.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restore urban ecosystems and plant native trees in SPU properties prioritizing BIPOC communities • Inventory and analyze SPU’s urban forest resources as part of development and implementation of Landscape Asset Management Plan • Comply with the City’s Two-for-One Tree Replacement Policy and report numbers quarterly to OSE

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in the City’s Urban Forestry Core Team, Management, and Interdepartmental Teams
<p>Trees for Seattle (T4S)</p>	<p>T4S is the communications umbrella for all the City’s urban forestry efforts. T4S works to make the City’s urban forestry work accessible and relevant to the public, particularly residents. T4S builds partnerships and strategies to grow and care for the urban forest on private property. T4S works across departments to manage the Trees for Neighborhoods and Tree Ambassador projects, an interdepartmental urban forestry website, the City’s urban forestry Facebook page, and monthly newsletter.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead engagement efforts to BIPOC communities in culturally relevant ways and “in-language” • Implement Trees for Neighborhoods and Tree Ambassador projects with emphasis on engaging BIPOC communities • Comply with the City’s Two-for-One Tree Replacement Policy and report numbers quarterly to OSE • Participate in the City’s Urban Forestry Core Team, Management, and Interdepartmental Teams • Manage the City’s Trees for Seattle website and social media channels