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October 12, 2023

Mayor Bruce Harrell
Seattle City Hall
P.O. Box 94749
Seattle, WA 98124-4749

Seattle City Council
Seattle City Hall
PO Box 34025
Seattle, WA 98124-4025

RE: Urban Forestry Commission recommendations for 2023-2024 mid-biennial budget adjustment

Dear Honorable Mayor Harrell and Seattle City Councilmembers,

Duwamish Lands (Seattle, WA) – Thank you for the opportunity to provide recommendations regarding the 2023-2024 Mid-Biennial Budget Adjustments.

The UFC provided initial budget recommendations in July. We have since received the City’s Review of Seattle Urban Forestry Expenditures, 2021-2024. This is the first time we have an overview of City-wide expenditures relating to urban forest management.

The City estimates that the endorsed 2024 budget contained approximately \$25.4 million in urban forestry-related expenditures, including direct management of trees, policy and planning, and community engagement. Expenditures in the previous three years ranged between \$21-24 million.

Still, Seattle experienced canopy losses across all management units between 2016 to 2021 and canopy inequities have worsened. Climate change is increasing stress on trees as well as the need for, and cost of, tree maintenance.

The UFC congratulates the City on its recent \$12.9 million award from the Biden-Harris Administration to grow our urban forest and develop green jobs. The UFC also appreciates the allocations for urban forest management in the 2024 mid-biennial budget adjustment, including:

- \$350,000 to expand the Trees for Seattle program;
- \$476,000 to increase urban-forestry staff capacity at SDCl;
- \$150,000 for a Tree Canopy Equity and Resilience Plan (rolled over from 2023).

However, reversing canopy decline will require significant additional investments in tree planting and maintenance, policy and planning, and community outreach. The UFC recommends the following for the 2023-2023 mid-biennial budget adjustment:

- Increase one-time funding for Tree Canopy Equity and Resilience Plan from \$150,000 to \$250,000
- Add \$60,000 one-time funding for Tree Protection Ordinance Climate Enhancement Task Force
- Add \$50,000 one-time funding for urban forest community engagement
- Add \$50,000 one-time funding for an assessment of Seattle’s natural capital
- Add \$5,000 to support community engagement work for Urban Forestry Commission
- Add funding / SLI for monitoring and evaluation of the updated tree protection ordinance
- Seek significant additional funds for direct management and planting of trees.

Increase one-time funding for Tree Canopy Equity and Resilience Plan from \$150,000 to \$250,000.

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.

Add \$60,000 one-time funding for Tree Ordinance Climate Enhancement Task Force.

In September 2023, the Green New Deal Oversight Board (GNDOB) and the UFC issued a joint letter calling for the creation of a Tree Protection Ordinance Climate Enhancement Task Force. This task force, co-chaired by the GNDOB and the UFC, aims to review the city's tree protection ordinance to bolster climate resilience and safeguard Seattle communities. Their primary objective is to propose a process for monitoring and enforcing the Tree Protection Ordinance, with a particular emphasis on the new fee-in-lieu system. In light of this, it's proposed to allocate a one-time funding of \$60,000 for this initiative, half to support consultant services and half to support OSE staff to help manage and support this process.

Add \$50,000 to 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’s Action Agenda prioritized creating “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 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.

Add \$50,000 to fund a valuation of Seattle’s natural capital and how to incorporate that into City reporting and planning.

In 2015, Seattle City Council unanimously passed SLI 75-1-A-2-2015 to develop a scope of work for valuing Seattle’s natural capital.

Seattle’s lands and waters and the biodiversity they support provide billions of dollars of value to the City and to the people who live, work, and play here. Without a baseline assessment and framework for considering these values in management decisions, we risk diminishing and undermining the ecological life support systems that we all rely on.

Add \$5,000 and additional staff time to support the UFC’s community engagement work.

The UFC is hindered by a lack of funding and staff support to equitably engage with community members. The staff liaison’s current time allocation supports the UFC at 25 hours per month, but UFC tasks frequently require additional staff time. The UFC also needs funds to use for stipends to support guest speakers, to book community spaces, etc. Some of this additional funding could also support capacity for UFC to enhance community engagement work associated with development of the Tree Canopy Equity and Resilience Plan. The UFC recommends providing \$5,000 to the Office of Sustainability and Environment to support the UFC’s community engagement work and increasing staff support to one full-time employee.

Add funding or a Statement of Legislative Intent for 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 that would include the elements listed in the attachment below.

Seek significant additional funding for direct management of trees, especially at parks.

The City experienced significant canopy losses at parks, particularly in natural areas. Losses occurred in the right-of-way over that time, too, but to a much lesser extent.

The City’s urban forest expenditures report shows SPR has been allocated 21% less in 2024 than SDOT for direct management of trees, yet SDOT cares for just 5% more canopy cover.

Increasing funding for tree maintenance and planting for SPR will be critical to reversing canopy loss at parks. This should be a high priority for the city, as there are fewer barriers to adding trees in parks than in other land use types.

Add funds to Improve system for reporting / enforcing tree code violations

Enforcement of tree protections in Seattle relies on community members to report illegal tree removal. City responses, if any, involve visiting a site after damage is done and there is currently no capacity for real-time response to potential violations. Ideally, inspectors could be deployed at the moment a violation is reported if illegal removal is suspected.

Illegal removal often occurs at hours or days when SDCI staff are not available to answer phone calls from individuals reporting violations. Adding staff on weekends to answer calls regarding illegal tree reports could help reduce occurrence of illegal removal.

There may be other strategies that could improve enforcement, including simpler systems online for verifying legal tree work or reporting violations.

Improving the enforcement system in this way would build on the improvements that were made through the Tree Service Provider Registration requirements.

The UFC will be happy to meet and share more about any of its recommendations at your convenience.

Sincerely,



Josh Morris, Co-Chair



Becca Neumann, Co-Chair

CC: Adiam Emery, Christa Valles, Yolanda Ho, Akshay Iyengar, Jessyn Farrell, Sharon Lerman

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ATTACHMENT

The UFC recommends monitoring and evaluating the following with regard to the updated tree protection ordinance:

- 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 UFC recommends the city update the in-lieu fees every budget cycle to ensure that they adequately reflect planting costs.
- 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 4 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.
- Develop a feedback loop so that the online mapping tool will be developed according to the public needs and be a source for monitoring the health of the urban forest. Suggestions include hosting public meetings to get public input on the content and function of the mapping tool.
- The UFC also recommends that the online mapping tool include reports of the survivability rate of existing, impacted, newly planted, and in-lieu trees.