

ANNUAL REPORT

To: Mayor and Council Members Date: 1/21/23

From: Chairperson, Amy Smith and Urban Forestry Commission Members

Subject: Urban Forestry Commission 2022 Annual Report to City Council

Summary Statement:

In 2017, the Asheville Urban Forestry Commission recommended that the City develop a logical long-term approach to improve the condition of our urban forest and reverse the decrease in the City's tree canopy. Working with an independent consultant and the Commission, the City conducted an Urban Forest Sustainability and Management Review of all its urban forest-related programs and policies. The results and recommendations of the sustainability review were presented to City Council in February of 2018. Since that time, the Urban Forestry Commission has made progress along with City Staff and City Council to implement some of the recommendations as outlined below.

- Provide adequate staffing, including the addition of an urban forester;
- Institute strategic planning, including development of a comprehensive urban forest master plan and updated ordinances;
- Strengthen private-public partnerships that engage volunteers, leverage the environmental interests of residents and visitors, and support the City's urban forestry goals;
- Provide innovation in vision and implementation, including linkage to the City's Comprehensive Plan, strengthening tree protections during development, and adoption of an urban tree canopy policy.

Despite implementation of some of these recommendations, the City of Asheville still needs to address and fund key aspects of sustainability review to meet canopy cover and forest equity goals and to improve urban forest resiliency to climate change.

Mission Statement:

The City of Asheville Urban Forestry Commission is committed to the equitable stewardship of the urban forest and green infrastructure that make Asheville a unique place of natural beauty. We seek to enhance the quality of life for residents, especially marginalized communities and those most affected by lack of tree canopy. We recognize that the urban forest provides multiple benefits to the people, environment, and economy of Asheville including mitigating climate change, reducing the urban heat island effect, cleaning the air, reducing noise, improving human health, providing habitat for a diversity of wildlife, reducing storm water runoff and erosion, and increasing property values. The Urban Forestry Commission will work to protect Asheville's urban forest and green infrastructure to preserve these benefits for the City of Asheville.

Our mission is to protect and enhance the urban forest of the City of Asheville through education, collaboration, and policy initiatives that align with the City's Living Asheville Comprehensive Plan and provide for environmental equity and climate resilience.

Accomplishments:

Technical Review Committee (TRC):

- The UFC provides oversight to TRC projects in relation to the TCPO, overall landscaping and vegetation requirements, and tree canopy preservation.

Alternative Compliance Review:

- The UFC reviews all requests for Alternative Compliance to landscape specifications and provides recommendations. Additionally, the UFC assists citizens with steep slope ordinance compliance and remediation.

Tree Canopy Protection Ordinance (TCPO) Enactment and Revision:

- Worked with City Staff in Development Services to improve and revise the TCPO after implementation and feedback from the community. Revisions are currently underway.
- Started the development of a framework for the fee-in-lieu funds, focused on equity and tree canopy improvements.

Recommendations to Council:

- Municipal Golf Course Project Recommendation
 - Recommended that the UFC be a consulting partner on the project and that the tree removal plan be revised to protect more mature trees and include planting of native trees.
- Recommendation to Protect Heritage Trees on City-owned and Private Property
- Budget Request Recommendation to fund an Urban Forester and Urban Forest Master Plan
 - Recommended to align with the Comprehensive Urban Forestry Recommendation of 2021.
- Boards and Commissions Realignment Recommendation
 - Recommended that City Council reject the proposed boards and commission realignment plan.
- Ravenscroft Reserve Initiative Recommendation
 - Recommended that City Council use fee-in-lieu funds collected from the TCPO to fund the acquisition of the property on Collier Avenue to protect a unique stand of mature hardwoods in the CBD.

Standards and Specs Manual Revisions:

- Participated in a working group to revise the Standards and Specifications Manual in regard to tree planting standards will improve the quality and survivability of trees and other vegetation in the City. Provisions for the protection and preservation of existing trees along with improved enforcement and oversight will help conserve and expand Asheville's urban forest canopy.

Collaboration with Capital Projects:

- Collaborated on the Vermont Ave sidewalk project and Haw Creek sidewalk project.

Review and Revision of Recommended Species List:

- Collaborated with DSD to update the list and educate developers.

Policy Recommendation(s):

On October 5, 2021, the UFC unanimously adopted a resolution in favor of a Comprehensive Urban Forestry Program for Asheville. This program would include staffing an Urban Forester position and creating an Urban Forest Master Plan for Asheville, including a full inventory of city trees. In 2022, the City Council voted to fund a new staff position for an Urban Forester, but the UFC urges City Council to put this remainder of this policy into action and allocate funds to an Urban Forest Master Plan and tree inventory to set priorities for improving our city's green infrastructure, climate resilience, and climate equity.

Upcoming Goals:

The most critical steps remaining to improve the management of Asheville's Urban Forest are to develop a Comprehensive Urban Forest Master Plan for the City and conduct a complete inventory of city-owned trees. These steps are recommended in the Urban Forest Sustainability and Management Review and outlined in the City's Comprehensive Plan.

An Urban Forest Master Plan would:

- Provide a clear framework to enable Asheville to be a "green city of the future" enjoying the benefits of major climate change mitigation including reduction of summer temperatures, increased carbon sequestration, improved storm water retention, and maintaining a sense of place;
- Be a guide to implement the green-infrastructure goals of the City's Comprehensive Plan;
- Provide a detailed inventory of city trees and updated and improved ordinances;
- Help avoid the costly mistakes of overbuilding impervious hard surfaces and having to retrofit green space and green-infrastructure;
- Be a "living document" helping to balance environmental and development needs;
- Provide criteria indicators to monitor changes in the urban forest for adaptive management.

An Inventory of City-owned trees would:

- Provide the data necessary to complete a comprehensive Urban Forest Master Plan;
- Create a database that can be used for tree equity work, tree planting, and tree maintenance;
- Provide asset data for the City of Asheville for trees as a piece of climate resiliency including carbon sequestration, stormwater mitigation, shade, and habitat benefits.

Current Membership:

Amy Smith (Chair), Dawn Chavez, Asheville GreenWorks (Vice-Chair), Roy Smith (Duke Power), Patrick Gilbert, Cecil Bothwell, Sharon Sumrall, Zoe Hoyle, Karen MacNeil, Chardin Detrich.