



Date: July 7, 2020
To: Councilmember Dan Strauss, Chair, Land Use and Neighborhoods Committee
From: Nathan Torgelson, SDCI Director; and Jessica Finn Coven, OSE Director
Subject: Tree Protections Update – 2Q 2020 Report

The City Council adopted [Resolution 31902](#) on September 16, 2019, requesting SDCI and OSE staff to explore strategies to protect existing trees, increase Seattle’s tree canopy cover, and balance City goals to support future growth and density as provided in the City’s Comprehensive Plan. The resolution also directs SDCI and OSE to report quarterly to the Chair of the Land Use and Neighborhoods (LUN) Committee on progress made. SDCI and OSE delivered the 1Q report to the LUN Committee on February 12, 2020. At that time, SDCI and OSE shared the scope, budget, and timeline for the work. This second report summarizes additional progress made to date and provides information on our next steps moving forward.

Background

The City’s Urban Forest Management Plan sets the goals and framework to guide Seattle’s urban forestry policies and programs. The City is in the process of creating a new Urban Forest Management Plan, an [effort](#) which began two years ago. The City’s Urban Forestry Core Team, with representatives from seven City departments with urban forestry mandates, have continued to work on the plan update with the focus on reaching out to environmental justice priority communities (people of color, low-income populations, linguistically isolated households, immigrants and refugees, Native Americans); creating stronger connections to our climate and density objectives; and creating stronger measures and accountability. The Core Team has been refining the plan’s goals, strategies, and actions based on feedback received from priority communities and is in the process of producing the next iteration of the plan.

SDCI staff regularly attend the City’s Urban Forestry Core Team meetings, actively participate as a Core Team member in support of urban forestry goals, and work closely with OSE as well as other city departmental staff to improve protections for trees located on private property. In addition, SDCI staff with technical expertise have met over a dozen times over the last nine months to better understand the issues with the existing tree protections and work through the technical aspects of potential updates.

Progress Made on Tree Protection Updates in 2Q 2020

SDCI, OSE and partners have been working to improve tree protections. We have continued to make considerable progress to date, including steps taken to achieve specific strategies as outlined in [Resolution 31902](#).

Developing Updates to Director’s Rule for Exceptional Trees

SDCI is in the process of developing a revised version of our Exceptional Tree Director’s Rule ([SDCI DR 2008-16](#)). The rule has been in place since 2008 and includes protection measures to retain and expand the definition of exceptional trees. The updates that SDCI is currently developing could potentially address several of the strategies outlined in Resolution 31902, such as:

- Adding replacement requirements for each exceptional tree that is removed in association with development.
- Creating a new definition of significant trees, defined as trees that are 6 inches or greater in diameter.
- Requiring all tree service providers operating in Seattle to meet minimum certification and training requirements.
- Simplifying tree planting and replacement requirements.

We look forward to sharing the proposed draft Rule with you soon.

Council Requested – Tracking Tree Removal & Replacement

SDCI has worked closely with Seattle IT to bring together a team of GIS analysts to develop a system to track tree removal, protection, and required planting on private property. As a result of this work, SDCI recently put a system in place that accounts for tree actions in the department's permit tracking system (Accela). In the new system, staff will pull information about tree actions that is currently required to be included in permit application materials and enter it into a Tree Tracker worksheet. While this new system will only be in effect for applications in the review pipeline and going forward, SDCI GIS analysts are working on uploading tree action information from older applications approved as far back as July 2019.

This new, improved data set will help SDCI and OSE determine tree canopy coverage on properties that have undergone development, which will help us monitor canopy coverage over time and inform future policy and code development. In addition, better tree data will improve the effectiveness of code enforcement. Inspectors will be in a stronger position to enforce penalties and fines related to illegal tree removals on properties undergoing development.

More Recent Actions

- Greater permit review coordination. Staff have benefitted from having two additional SDCI arborists available to assist in the review of permit applications that involve tree protection or removal and advise on enforcement cases.
- Updated education and information. Staff have updated the SDCI website including information on tree protection best practices to help inform the public about the value of trees and the tree protection regulations.
- Expanded partnership with the Urban Forestry Commission (UFC). SDCI has briefed the UFC throughout this process with the most recent briefing held on May 13, 2020. In addition, SDCI has held four deliberative sessions with a subcommittee of the commission. These sessions have provided another opportunity for staff to benefit from the expertise of Commissioners and collaborate on technical issues.

Future Work

Before moving ahead with any additional changes to the City's tree regulations beyond what is described above, SDCI and OSE will be re-evaluating our approach. Neighborhoods in Seattle with more low-income and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) residents have lower percentages of tree canopy coverage and face greater exposure to environmental hazards, resulting in higher rates of negative health outcomes such as asthma. Given that trees help mitigate some impacts of climate change, including increase in temperature, poor air quality, and other human health vulnerabilities related to the changing environment, addressing these racial disparities will be the urban forestry team's guiding principle for any changes going forward.

This future work will involve evaluating the outstanding strategies identified in [Resolution 31902](#) through a racial equity lens and considering whether any additional or alternative strategies may be better suited to addressing environmental disparities in BIPOC neighborhoods. It will also involve targeted focus of future outreach and engagement efforts to reach residents who live in low-income and low-canopy neighborhoods. We look forward to working with you over the next several weeks and months as we begin to redefine this body of work and move forward with an approach explicitly rooted in environmental justice.

Copy: Aly Pennucci and Yolanda Ho, City Council Central Staff