



MEMORANDUM

TO: Urban Forestry Board Members

FROM: Walter Passmore, Urban Forester

DATE: April 1, 2011

SUBJECT: 2011 Urban Forest Summit: Guidance for Imagine Austin Plan

On Friday January 21, eighty-five stakeholders participated in the 2011 State of Austin's Urban Forest Summit (henceforth referred to as Summit) held at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. The 2011 Summit explored the relationship between the urban forest and the urban form and how the City of Austin can integrate both for the benefit of the urban environment. The goal of the Summit was to develop material that could be integrated in the forthcoming Imagine Austin Plan (henceforth referred to as Plan), the City of Austin's comprehensive plan. The Summit featured guest speaker, Kathleen Wolf, Ph.D., who spoke on the social dimensions of the urban forest and how this body of research can assist in urban forest management. More information regarding Dr. Wolf's research can be found at <http://www.naturewithin.info>. A website containing information about the Summit can be found here: <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/parks/forestrysummit.htm>

Drawing on presentations by Dr. Wolf and Matt Hollon, City of Austin Watershed Protection, the stakeholders were divided into working groups to discuss vision statements, barriers to success, and solutions for implementation as they pertain to challenges in managing Austin's urban forest. Approximately 250 unique comments and suggestions were contributed by the working groups. The comments were compiled verbatim into a spreadsheet and grouped by common themes. The comments were then matched with one or more of the seven building blocks that comprise the elements of the Plan. With the comments now grouped by building block(s), a word frequency count, synthesis of the comments, and consolidation of comments were performed in order to develop clear, concise, yet comprehensive statements reflective of the Summit. The summarized comments were rephrased to match the language used for the strategic directions as stated in the Plan and these comments were consolidated into concise points included in this document. This document is intended to be used by staff and other Plan

working group members to guide discussion regarding urban forest topics and to provide guidance for incorporating urban forest elements into the building blocks of the Plan.

Land Use, Transportation, and Urban Design

Instead of being considered an obstacle, the urban forest should be considered an asset to be preserved and enhanced with regard to land use, transportation, and urban design. Trees not only encourage the utilization of urban spaces and transportation corridors, but also serve as elements of green infrastructure that provide critical public benefits and conserve natural ecosystem values and functions that provide benefits to citizens. In order to produce sustainable, functional, and vibrant urban spaces, land and transportation regulations and development must emphasize and preserve trees and green spaces while remaining flexible enough to incorporate creative solutions based on site characteristics. Tree preservation, conservation and connectivity of forested areas, and replanting the right tree species in the right location is paramount to urban forest vitality. This approach is underpinned by the need for regional level involvement and science-driven forest management that recognizes different land uses (e.g., urban commercial, semi-rural subdivision), physical characteristics (e.g., eastern Edwards Plateau or Blackland Prairie, riparian or upland), sensitivities (e.g., endangered species habitat, Edward's Aquifer protection), and stressors (e.g., invasive species, degraded eastern watersheds, etc.).

Specific Comments and Recommendations from the Urban Forest Summit:

- Trees and other vegetation should be considered part of the public infrastructure and should be protected and supported as such.
- Development regulations shall recognize the need for an urban forest that is representative of native tree diversity and canopy structure.
- Tree regulations and development should be mutually flexible to allow for unique solutions for the incorporation of tree canopy in dense urban sites.
- The site design process should be simplified for clarity and ease of use to ensure that tree specifications are being incorporated consistently.
- Progressive open space and land conservation policies should be adopted and should target environmentally sensitive areas. Undeveloped forest land should be preserved as a public resource.
- Redevelopment, urban infill and zoning regulations should be implemented in a manner that does not conflict with tree preservation regulations.
- Increase connectivity of green spaces and transportation corridors by preserving and incorporating trees in the designing and planning processes. Use trees as visual cues to encourage recognition and use of the corridors.
- Incorporate tree preservation and plants into transportation plans that promote and encourage alternative modes of transportation, such as walking and biking; trees provide shade and promote utilization of alternative transportation despite the severity of the Central Texas climate.
- Encourage the use of the right tree in the right space; properly sited trees serve as long-lasting, low-maintenance, sustainable landscape elements.

- Tree preservation, plantings, and green space can be used to maintain and enhance the character of neighborhoods and public spaces. Trees can increase the utilization of public gathering spaces.
- Support a regional-scale approach to urban forest management and green space design to utilize common resources, share data, and foster mutual support for interagency tree regulations.
- A science-based approach to urban forest management is needed, including protecting natural resources and environmental systems by limiting land use and transportation development in sensitive environmental areas and preserving new areas of open space.

Housing and Neighborhoods

The urban forest is a critical component of neighborhood character and individual trees play a role in defining neighborhood identity. In addition to providing energy conservation, reducing stormwater runoff, and other ecosystem services, trees can promote health and wellness by providing citizens with access to nature in neighborhoods that lack connectivity to parks and green spaces. Trees can enhance the quality of life of Austin's citizens across all housing and neighborhood types.

Specific Comments and Recommendations from the Urban Forest Summit:

- Preserve heritage trees as historic elements, especially during redevelopment and infill.
- Provide more open space and trees in low-income areas.
- Use trees as green infrastructure in multi-use areas (e.g., stormwater/flood structures, plazas, transportation corridors, etc) that encourage people to use the space.
- Provide tree-lined walkable / bikeable transit corridors to connect neighborhoods to local services and parks.
- Improve energy-efficiency of homes using tree canopy.
- Encourage neighborhood association involvement in tree maintenance.

Economy

The urban forest provides many direct and indirect economic benefits and has the potential to further expand Austin's attractiveness to businesses and business patrons. In addition to providing a sense of place that attracts visitors, trees and green infrastructure provide more productive work environments as well as increase retail patronage and revenues. Investments made toward expanding and enhancing canopy coverage, especially in business districts, will be returned in the form of business recruitment, retention and increased business revenues.

In addition, increasing population and employment bases will require access to affordable utilities. Because trees reduce utility costs and energy demand by shading structures and provide ecosystem services that reduce the need for engineered solutions, an investment in the urban forest should be considered an investment in sustainable utilities.

Specific Comments and Recommendations from the Urban Forest Summit

- Allow for flexibility in development standards, rules, and policies that promote the use of the most effective best management practices for increasing tree canopy.
- Trees are a utility both directly and indirectly; increase the urban canopy as an investment in affordable, sustainable utility infrastructure; trees create efficiencies in the production, distribution, and conservation of other utilities, such as electricity and water.
- Expand and enhance the urban forest in the downtown area and business districts to stimulate business revenue, attract visitors, and provide better workplaces.
- Provide financial incentives for small and large businesses to preserve, protect, and enhance tree canopy and green infrastructure in a sustainable manner.
- Strengthen partnerships among city departments and the business community to encourage the spread of knowledge of tree benefits and the consistency of application of tree benefits.

Conservation and Environmental Resources

Science-driven management and policies is vital to conserving, protecting, and supporting the City's natural resource systems. Sound urban forest management includes preserving the diversity of native trees, age class, canopy structure, and the other woody and herbaceous plants that represent the vegetative component of the biotic community. Management and policies should also recognize broader initiatives beyond individual tree preservation when addressing issues such as planning and purchasing conservation easements and open space, connectivity of forested areas, and invasive species management.

Specific Comments and Recommendations from the Urban Forest Summit:

- Provide incentives for preservation of forested areas and open space.
- Canopy goals should be established.
- Diverse age class and species is important to the urban forest.
- Science-driven forest management is paramount.
- Reduce turfgrass and repair areas with native vegetation.
- Regional collaboration is necessary to maximize resources and common interests.
- Planting the right species in the right location is imperative to plant survival and the vitality of the urban forest.
- Increase plantings in neighborhoods to create better buffers, improve walkability, and develop pocket parks.
- Forest acquisition is needed to protect vegetative communities that provide benefits, such as water quality functions and endangered species habitat.
- Determine the proper distribution of parkland for recreation and preservation.
- Invasive species should be controlled.
- Trees should be considered part of the existing infrastructure of City.

City Facilities and Services

Just as public buildings and flood control devices provide the public with essential services, trees are a public utility that provide Austin citizens with irreplaceable ecological services and improved quality of life. Trees should be incorporated into park and trail designs to enhance recreation and promote healthy lifestyles. A sustainably managed urban forest will provide citizens with safe, functional, and attractive outdoor spaces.

Specific Comments and Recommendations from the Urban Forest Summit:

- Use trees as elements of sustainable design for parks and trails and design parks and tree plantings with water conservation and maintenance reduction in mind.
- Trees are a public utility that improves energy efficiency of nearby buildings, improves air quality, and reduces stormwater and erosion impacts, especially along creeks.
- Use trees in transportation corridors to make alternative transportation, such as walking and biking, a more attractive option. Increase connectivity of parkland and preserves with “tree corridors”.
- Manage liability and risk of trees and increase longevity and sustainability of the urban forest by providing proper care.
- Identify, acquire, and protect forest land for open space and passive recreation.

Culture and Society

The urban forest is an important and storied part of Austin’s culture and history. The citizens of Austin have long valued and cared for the urban forest as it provide a sense of place, represent historic events, and connection with nature that is unique to Austin. Numerous Live Oak trees, such as the Treaty Oak and Auction Oaks, illustrate Austin’s unique legacy and relationship with its urban forest. As such, trees should be treated as cultural and historic resources for generations to come in Austin.

- Trees are important public historic resources that deserve preservation.
- Ensure that development and redevelopment is compatible with tree preservation.
- Provide public education about trees as a way to develop a connection with nature.

For questions or comments regarding this memorandum, please contact Walter Passmore, Urban Forester, at 512-974-9545 or walter.passmore@ci.austin.tx.us

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