

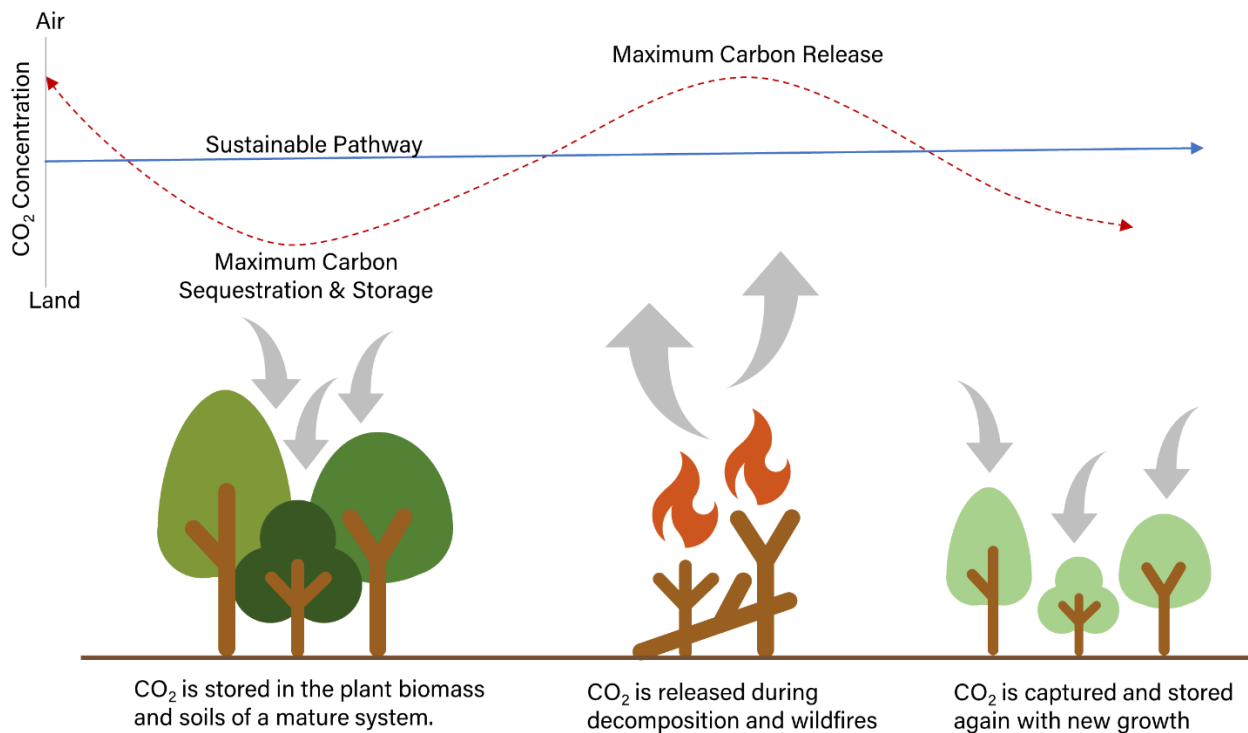


NATURAL SYSTEMS

Natural systems are all around us. They consist of the plants, animals, soils, hydrology, geology, and weather patterns that are linked to form functioning natural communities. Natural systems perform many critical services to human health and well-being, including removing carbon from the atmosphere known as carbon sequestration. While natural systems may not have the largest impact on our city's total emissions, they are one of the few ways to achieve negative emissions.

Our natural systems are critically important because they provide various benefits to our communities beyond carbon sequestration. These “ecosystem services” include health and wellness, ecological health, and climate resilience. However, due to the climate changes we’re already experiencing, many of our natural systems and the services they provide have already started to degrade. With further changes to the climate, the loss of benefits and services will continue, and the chance to significantly restore and recover our natural systems will be limited.

The Natural Carbon Cycle



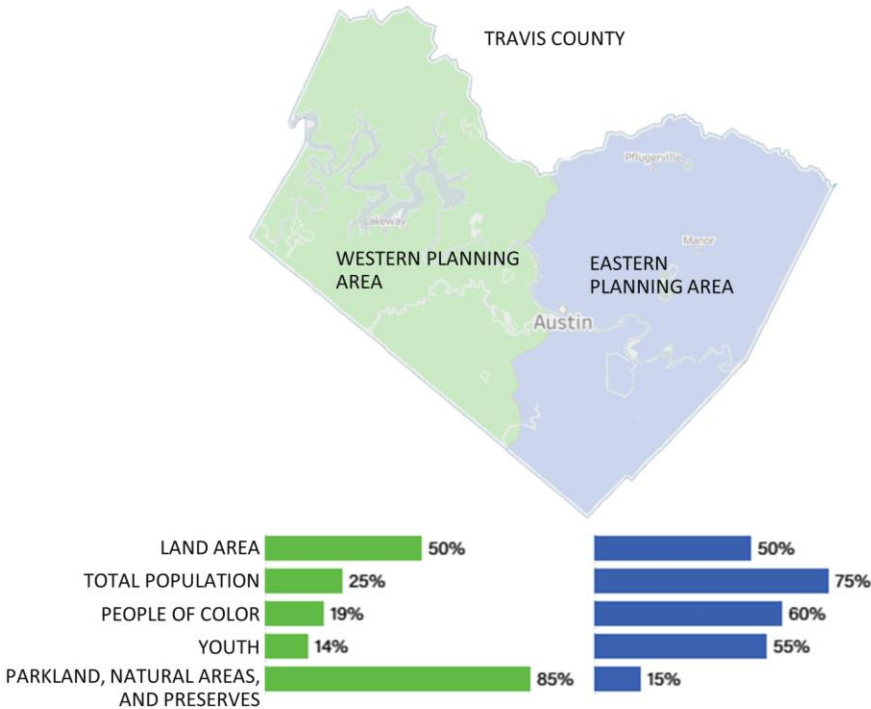
Natural systems are naturally carbon neutral but asking them to also sequester human-made emissions goes above and beyond their natural ability. Additionally, interferences such as deforestation, soil disturbance, wildfires, or large die-offs due to climate change can make natural systems release more carbon than they absorb, turning carbon sinks into carbon sources.

Most of Austin's protected natural areas — such as preserves and conservation lands — are in the west, while East Austin has taken on much of the burden of the city's growth and development. Tree cover also varies significantly between the two sides of town.

While the city’s existing total tree canopy cover is approximately 36%, East Austin sees considerably lower rates of tree canopy coverage than other parts of the city. Historically, these issues could have been attributed to geological and ecological differences, but that should no longer be a reason to neglect investments in natural systems in East Austin. However, care and consideration should be taken to ensure that new and renewed natural areas in East Austin reflect the context in which they sit, both social and ecological.

Even though protected natural spaces are unequally distributed in the east and west, parkland is distributed relatively evenly across the city. However, there is room for improvement in ensuring equity in our parks’ function, quality, and management. Given that some types of parkland and higher maintenance levels can have gentrifying effects on nearby communities, special care should be taken to help mitigate displacement that may follow any investment in green spaces. Currently, the City is prioritizing parkland acquisition and development projects in systematically excluded areas with low-income communities, youth, and communities of color. In pairing these indicators with data on existing conditions, we can ensure parks remain valuable assets to all residents throughout the city.

Distribution of Green Spaces in Travis County



The western half of Travis county contains 25% of the population, but 85% of parkland, natural areas, and preserves. This data was originally presented in the [Travis County Greenprint for Growth](#) document published in 2006, and we are still working to rectify these inequities.

Most of the agricultural lands in Austin are concentrated within or near low-income communities and communities of color. Conventional practices on some farms can be detrimental to environmental, climate, and community health. There is an extensive history of Black farmers in Austin, but the number of Black farmers has declined drastically after 1930. This was partly due to the Great Migration when many Black families moved out of the rural South and an effect of cities, including Austin, using master plans to force Black and Hispanic families to move into specific parts of the city, sometimes forcing them from their farmland.






Business owners of color, both in rural and urban areas, also face discrimination in gaining access to land and capital. Additionally, prime farmlands are also prime development parcels, and the people who work these lands are often and easily exploited. All of this points to the need to support the preservation of land, farmers, and farm workers. Protection of farmland and the use of regenerative agricultural practices are key to ensuring that agricultural lands provide a suite of vital ecosystem services — contributing positively to, rather than degrading, our natural systems.

The issues outlined above have left communities — particularly low-income communities and communities of color in the eastern portions of the city — feeling sacrificed and neglected and contribute to our city’s growing health inequities. The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the value of our outdoor spaces, amenities, and resources while demonstrating how open spaces can address community needs and concerns.

This plan calls for a new approach to public land investments that prioritizes community value and focuses on providing environmental benefits and services to neighborhoods in the Eastern Crescent. Protecting, expanding, and restoring the natural areas, sustainable agricultural lands, tree canopy cover, and parks in Austin is an investment in our community's health, livelihood, and culture.

If all the natural systems goals and strategies were implemented, the natural systems in and around Austin could sequester about 5.25% of the city’s total carbon emissions, or 682,738 tons of CO₂.

Community Benefits of Natural Systems

 Health & Wellness	 Quality of Life	 Ecological Health	 Climate Change	 Safety & Resilience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical activity • Mental health • Social relations • Air quality • Food production 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recreation • Aesthetics • Job creation • Education opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protection of green spaces • Support natural function and processes • Habitat • Biodiversity • Water quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heat island reduction • Carbon sequestration • Energy and water use reduction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flood control • Heat respite • Soil moisture

Community Feedback

We heard natural systems-related comments and concerns in community conversations through community workshop participants, the Community Climate Ambassadors’ work, and online survey responses through SpeakUp Austin. Community members were overall in support of more trees, access, and open spaces. They also expressed the need to shift Austinites’ relationship with the environment in a way that expands and respects our connection to nature and enhances our understanding of the important things nature does for humans.

Concerns noted the overcrowding and general maintenance and cleanliness of green spaces, along with fear around the potential loss of trees (both from development and climate change) and the need for more functional green spaces that address flood protection and wildlife habitat.

Additionally, making green spaces more physically accessible and better reflecting the community’s values and cultural needs was a clear desire.

There were also concerns around the implications that these recommendations could have for development, density, and affordability. We hope to move in a direction that changes the discourse from one of competition to one of alliance, cooperation, mutual benefits, and shared values for items like conservation, tree protection, parkland provision, and affordable housing. An example of this is the City of Los Angeles’ [Pathway to Parks and Affordable Development Report](#).

Many comments touched on the importance of local food production — both people growing their own food and supporting local farmers using sustainable practices — and recognizing that climate change will have a major impact in this area. There was also discussion around other climate impacts, such as the potential for droughts affecting local water quality and availability and the effects of extreme heat on our water supply, vegetation, and agriculture.

People also expressed wanting to be engaged and part of the solution related to community stewardship but not knowing how. As a result, they recommended more awareness, education, and resources for community members. More interest was generally indicated for partnerships with local organizations rather than City-led programs and outreach. Additionally, many expressed support for youth education and programs.

Natural Systems Principles



The Natural Systems Advisory Group established five principles that guided the creation of these recommendations.

These principles focus on ensuring healthy lands — which sequester more carbon than unhealthy or underperforming lands — and promoting the many other community benefits provided by healthy lands.

GOAL 1:

By 2030, legally protect an additional 20,000 acres of carbon pools on natural lands and manage all new and existing natural areas (approximately 70,000 acres total), focusing on resilience.



Strategy 1: Protect natural lands

Identify additional woodland, grassland, and wetland systems for protection, focusing on new conservation lands in the Travis County Eastern Planning Areas while prioritizing benefits for low-income communities and communities of color. Legally protect lands through mechanisms such as fee simple acquisition and conservation easements.

How we'll get there:

- Create and update a matrix for land conservation decisions across departments that prioritizes multiple benefits — especially for low-income communities and communities of color — to include recreational access, carbon sequestration, restoration and conservation of biodiversity, habitat connectivity, water quality, and air quality.
- Continue to aggressively recruit and incorporate community input in developing the criteria used for land acquisition.
- Identify and pursue innovative financial methods to purchase or protect lands such as:
 - Use sales tax revenue, development fees, or bonds, especially when linked to multi-benefits and resilience for low-income communities and communities of color.
 - Consider local carbon credit markets or offset programs that include natural lands, sustainable working lands, and the potential for stormwater credit trading. As an example, reference the [Seattle Carbon Plus Program](#).
 - Explore the use of economic development funds for land protection and promotion through ecotourism activities. Considerations may include Hotel Occupancy Tax revenues, and Tax Increment Finance districts generated by development or roadway expansion.
 - Enable, encourage and incentivize low-impact development and conservation developments — an approach to housing development design that balances protection of natural resources with the provision of housing, economic development, and social benefits for people.⁶⁴ This may require the City to update codes to allow for this type of development and work with and define new roles and relationships with private developers. To the greatest extent possible, special consideration should be given to preventing soil disturbance.
 - Continue to require parkland dedication or fee-in-lieu of dedication for new residential and hotel or motel developments.
 - Expand parkland dedication to include commercial developments. New commercial development directly impacts the City's parks with additional employees, clients, and consumers that use City parks, thereby establishing an essential nexus between parkland dedication requirements and commercial development.
- Focus acquisition of new conservation lands in the Travis County Eastern Planning Areas in alignment with the [Healthy Parks Plan](#), regional population growth projections, and Travis County acquisition goals for managed natural areas and parkland.

Strategy 2: Manage natural lands for resilience

Prepare natural lands for climate change and avoid catastrophic loss of carbon pools through active, intentional, and holistic management.

How we'll get there:

- Create, update and implement restoration and management guides for all protected lands under City and County jurisdiction. Consider restoration or mimicry of natural processes, increasing native species and structural diversity, improving soil health, and facilitating plant community shifts to more resilient states.
- Leverage the [traditional ecological knowledge](#) of local Indigenous people and other people of color and compensate them appropriately for their time, expertise, and contributions. Plans, policies, and programs should clearly state how Indigenous people will be involved in and benefit from stewardship of lands that have historically been in their care.
- Support local research on increasing the resiliency of Central Texas ecosystems to the stressors and disturbances that models predict will become more common with climate change, such as extended drought, extreme heat, and more frequent extreme weather events. Assist in the dissemination of that information to local landowners and land managers.
- Encourage youth participation and learning opportunities by partnering with or supporting school and youth programs around natural lands management and restoration efforts.
- Encourage resilient grasslands and woodlands on private property by creating land management guides and landowner education, assistance, and incentive programs for private landowners. Develop programs in partnership with community members and community groups and connect landowners with existing assistance programs.

"People want to do their part and would like to teach others to take better care of the environment, but there is still much to learn."

– Austin Community Member

Strategy 3: Increase community access and positive perceptions of public land

Ensure that natural lands are accessible to and perceived positively by the community. When more people use and feel a connection to natural areas, they provide more community value. In return, communities are more likely to support conservation and stewardship.

How we'll get there:

- Help people to enjoy and be comfortable in nature by:
 - Addressing the accessibility of trails and spaces for all ages and abilities.
 - Ensuring both physical and perceived safety for users.
 - Recruiting members of nearby communities to serve as ambassadors or hosts in natural spaces to create a bridge between these spaces and the surrounding residents. Compensate these community members appropriately for their time and contributions, similar to the [Park Ranger Cadet program](#).

- Implementing programs, such as exploration programs designed for youth, that provide guided, safe experiences for people who may not be comfortable in natural spaces by themselves.
- Providing programming and signage that is inclusive, welcoming, in multiple languages, and highlights BIPOC histories and experiences on local lands, such as the 2019 Austin Design Week session on Reviving Lost Histories and Ecologies.
- Implement solutions to provide community access to natural lands without causing ecological degradation.
- Ensure all Austinites are within walking distance of a park.

Strategy 4: Protect water sources

Protect quantity and quality of source water for municipal supply and regional environmental flows — especially in the face of climate change-driven threats like heat, drought, flood, and wildfire. Ecosystems cannot function properly and sequester carbon if they don't have the adequate water supply to survive and thrive.

How we'll get there:

- Recognize that permanently protecting natural lands directly helps ensure the natural function of waterways and water quality.
- Work with regional agencies and organizations, such as the Capital Area Council of Governments, to form partnerships with organizations working on these issues that are run by low-income communities and communities of color.
- Improve groundwater recharge through expanding green infrastructure and riparian restoration programs and incentives on public and private lands in Austin and upstream.
- Prioritize City projects and programs that provide multiple benefits related to improving water quality and sequestration rates — especially when they most directly benefit low-income communities and communities of color.

GOAL 2:



By 2030, protect 500,000 acres of farmland from development in the five-county region* through legal protections or regenerative agriculture programs.

**Food systems are large and complex, requiring solutions that invest both within and beyond the City limits, hence addressing these recommendations at the regional or 5-county scale. This is similar to the many initiatives that the City invests in “outside” the City but for the benefits of City residents, such as watershed and water quality protection, power generation, and public health.*

Strategy 1: Protect working lands

Identify lands with prime farmland soils and farmlands of unique and local significance as defined by the [Sustainable SITES Initiative](#) in the 5-county region and protect them from development. This can be done through land conservation bonds, agricultural land trusts such as the [American Farmland Trust](#), Natural Resource Conservation Service and Trust for Public Lands programs, Travis County Conservation Easements, and similar methods.

How we'll get there:

- Counties and/or County extension offices in the 5-county region should jointly fund a staff position to work across the entire region. This position could focus on the conservation easement program, provide technical expertise and advice for farmers and landowners and create or manage regenerative agriculture education and certification programs.
- Work with developers to encourage new communities being built on prime farmland soils to be designed as “agrihoods” — communities that integrate agriculture and working farms into housing developments.⁶⁵

Strategy 2: Reform agricultural tax appraisals

Address issues with local and federal agricultural tax appraisals and exemptions that contribute to desertification and soil loss.

How we'll get there:

- Work with Travis County to reevaluate and update the requirements for the Agricultural Tax Exemption to encourage regenerative practices and make more ecologically desirable exemptions, like the wildlife exemption, more appealing and easier to obtain.
- Host a summit of tax appraisers within the 5-county area to start creating buy-in beyond Travis County.
- Provide an additional City incentive to landowners who receive the county tax exemption to use regenerative agriculture or similar practices that promote carbon sequestration, limit compaction, prevent erosion, conserve water and reduce nutrient runoff.
- Promote programs that allow scientists to conduct climate-related or similar research on private lands in exchange for landowner tax breaks, such as the [Texas Ecology Laboratory](#).

Strategy 3: Support farmers through financial assistance

Support farmers in the 5-county region who want to implement carbon-related soil programs or regenerative agricultural practices by providing direct financial assistance, specifically for farmers of color.

How we'll get there:

- Explore partnerships and incentives for installing solar panels on farms between crops and pay farmers for allowing renewable energy equipment on their land.
- Provide City-funded micro-grants to help cover startup costs for regenerative agriculture or conservation irrigation equipment for small-scale and local farmers.

- Create a down payment support program for small-scale and local farmers and consider potential requirements for loan forgiveness. The [Michigan Good Food Fund](#) could serve as an example.
- Study and consider tying City-provided financial assistance to requirements, such as importing and selling products locally, ensuring fair labor requirements, carrying liability insurance, and other recommendations outlined by the [Equitable Food Initiative](#).

Strategy 4: Provide farmers with resources

Support farmers who want to start regenerative agricultural practices by providing access to land and other necessary resources, specifically prioritizing farmers of color.

How we'll get there:

- Facilitate creating a merchants association for small-scale and local farmers to help find, access, and pool resources, collaborate on distribution networks, and advocate for the industry. Explore local organizations currently working on this and see if there are ways to support them first. Ensure inclusive participation and representation through deliberate outreach to farmers of color. Leverage the model and lessons learned from local groups already doing similar work, such as the [Sustainable Food Center](#).
- Create a program that facilitates or mediates partnerships between private and public landowners who may not be actively working their lands and farmers using regenerative agriculture practices.
- Make City and County lands available for agricultural incubators that provide communal resources, such as equipment, storage facilities, and distribution for small-scale regenerative and sustainable farming operations. The [Intervale Center](#) could serve as a case study.
- Explore leasing public lands to for-profit farms in exchange for using sustainable practices and contributing to the public good in some way, such as through workforce development or increasing the supply and donation of local food.

Strategy 5: Expand composting

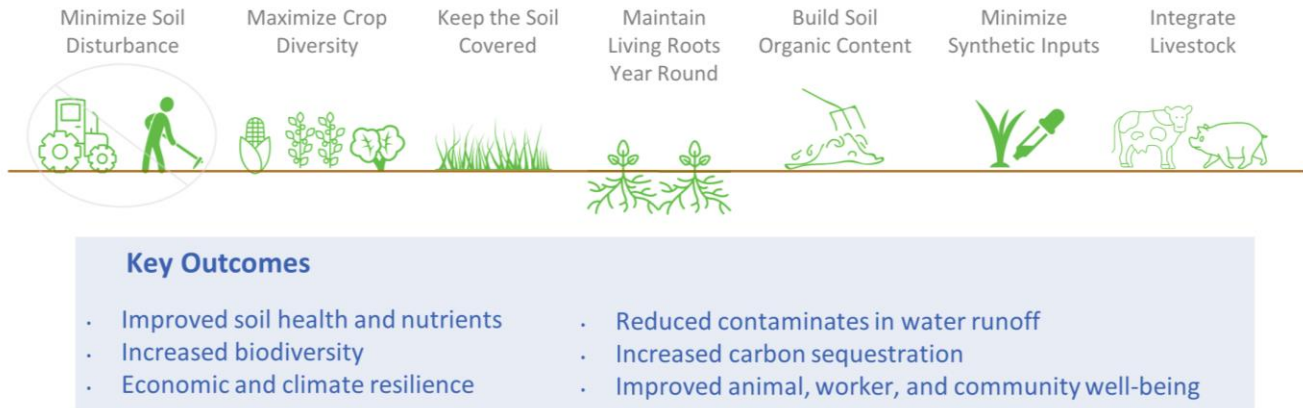
Expand the use of compost generated by local composting programs.

How we'll get there:

- Explore ways to utilize more local waste streams in local compost.
- Work in partnership with local farmers to understand how locally made compost is being used and what is required for the compost to better meet their needs.
- Provide free compost to farmers participating in carbon-related soil programs or regenerative agricultural practices. The [Marin Carbon Project](#) could serve as an example.
- Create educational materials and demonstration projects to raise awareness about the value and environmental benefits of using compost at home and on private projects.
- Work with City departments that operate with a heavy capital improvement planning workload to require the use of local compost on project sites.

- Clarify land use and zoning language to identify areas of the city where composting operations are allowed, both as an accessory use and separate from agricultural or urban farmland uses.

Principles of Regenerative Agriculture



Regenerative agriculture is one approach to sustainable farming and agriculture that seeks to improve and work in harmony with natural systems. Many specific practices can fall under the umbrella of regenerative agriculture, often focusing on soil health, biodiversity, water quality, and resilience to climate change impacts.

Strategy 6: Strengthen workforce development for farmers

Encourage a fundamental change in the next generation of farmers by creating and supporting agriculture-specific jobs creation programs and working lands-specific youth programs — especially for aspiring farmers of color.

How we'll get there:

- Utilize the regional position recommended in Strategy 1 and the merchants association recommended in Strategy 4 to connect participants to the industry and create a pipeline to real jobs in regenerative agriculture. Leverage the experience and expertise of local groups that are already doing similar work, such as [Farm Share Austin's Farmer Starter Program](#). The [U.S. Department of Agriculture's Center of Community Prosperity](#) may be one opportunity for funding.
- Integrate sustainable agriculture into secondary and high school programs, including a track for the Austin Independent School District's Career and Technical Education program and Austin Community College's Sustainable Agriculture program.

GOAL 3:

Achieve at least 50% citywide tree canopy cover by 2050, focusing on increasing canopy cover equitably.



Strategy 1: Protect canopy cover on City lands

Adopt a “no net loss” policy for tree canopy on public lands.

How we'll get there:

- Using the 50% citywide goal as an average, create canopy cover target goals for different public land types, such as active use, corridor, cultural/historic, mixed-use, natural area, passive use, special use, etc.
- Require tree canopy replacement for any necessary tree removal on public lands. Allow for on- or off-site canopy mitigation.
- Regularly collect and analyze citywide tree canopy cover data.
- Ensure the species of newly planted trees are native or adapted, appropriate for the location, function, habitat, etc., and consider potential future changes to the climate.

Strategy 2: Promote tree protections and landscape regulations

Promote no net loss of tree canopy on private developments by increasing tree protections and landscape regulation or working with developers and homeowner's associations to create incentives.

How we'll get there:

- Expand existing tree protections and landscape regulations for private development to all of the city's extraterritorial jurisdiction.
- Require new developments to document tree canopy cover in the City's geographic information system database for subdivisions and site plans.
- Ensure that developers or property managers are required to ensure the health of new trees that are planted. They should meet requirements that ensure the long-term health of trees planted, saved, or preserved for up to five years after construction.
- Create a way to enforce tree canopy and health requirements on private developments. An example is the Watershed Protection Department's impervious cover requirement that is tied to the Drainage Utility Fund.
- Require decompaction and other healthy soils practices, such as high organic content, for any areas with permeable surfaces in new subdivisions and site plans. Additionally, review and edit the impervious ground cover requirement as necessary to consider impervious cover within a watershed-level context rather than at the lot level.
- Address barriers to additional tree plantings in subdivisions, developed lots, City rights-of-way, parkland dedications, detention pond basins, etc.
- Require or incentivize new developments to participate in reforestation projects if there are Critical Water Quality Zones or floodplains in a subdivision or site plan, or if the overall canopy cover for a project is expected to be less than 50%.

"I'd like for all people in Austin to have access to tree-shade corridors, shaded paths for human-powered transportation and public thriving green spaces."

– Austin Community Member

- Ensure the species of newly planted trees are native or adapted and appropriate for the location, function, habitat, and future changes in the climate.
- Work with other jurisdictional entities and surrounding communities to harmonize policies around tree protection, promotion, health, and resilience. This will help ensure that we aren't unintentionally pushing development outside the city limits to avoid tree protections.

Strategy 3: Increase community tree planting

Increase City funding for community tree-planting programs focused on low-income communities and communities of color.

How we'll get there:

- Prioritize programs that allow communities to have real decision-making power and input on where new tree plantings will provide the most benefit.
- Provide additional funding and grants for community-led, neighborhood-scale tree planting, tree care, water quality, and soil health programs.
- Grow City-led reforestation projects within drainage easements, floodplains, and stream buffers in Eastern Crescent neighborhoods.
- Work with the Austin Transportation Department, Capital Metro, Corridor Planning Office, and Forestry Division to increase tree canopy in road rights-of-way, especially along transit routes and stops, to provide residents with increased resilience to extreme heat. Consider ridership numbers, urban space quality, heat levels, and expected wait times when prioritizing tree planting at transit stops.



A young volunteer holds a tree sapling for his parents at a tree planting event. Photo: Valerie Tamburri

Strategy 4: Promote tree health and resilience on private and non-City public lands

Create a tree, water and soil management, and resilience guide for various types of private property. Provide City technical and financial assistance for tree planting and care for residents and small businesses in low-income communities and communities of color to ensure long-term health and tree canopy benefits in Austin neighborhoods.

How we'll get there:

- Provide a City “tree concierge” service and partner with community members to provide easily accessible information about keeping trees healthy and choosing the right species of trees for their locations and needs.
- Add tree maintenance and care to the City's Minor Home Repair Grants Program.

- Provide City-funded grants to homeowner’s associations, neighborhood groups, residents, and small businesses in low-income communities and communities of color to help cover expenses related to tree care.
- Foster partnerships with Austin-based green jobs training programs to ensure that tree health and resilience are incorporated into the curriculum. Complete the pipeline by incentivizing and encouraging the use of graduates from local green jobs training programs to complete the work that comes out of recommendations outlined in this strategy.



GOAL 4:

By 2030, include all City-owned lands under a management plan that results in neutral or negative carbon emissions and maximizes community co-benefits.

Strategy 1: Prioritize carbon neutrality for public lands

Prioritize carbon neutrality and community benefits in land acquisition and management practices for public lands.

How we’ll get there:

- Complete the City land ownership and management plan database.
- Prioritize new parkland acquisitions based on multiple environmental and community benefits, especially for low-income communities and communities of color.
- Evaluate potential land management practices based in part on carbon lifecycle analyses, specifically including landscape water usage.
- Use carbon-negative or low-carbon management practices, such as soil protection, limited mowing, no-mow, and conversion of high water use landscapes into native plantings.
- Utilize the Sustainable SITES certification for Parks and Recreation Department projects when feasible or align with the City’s Green Building Policy.
- Encourage private residents and other public entities, such as the Austin Independent School District, the University of Texas at Austin, the State Capitol, and the Texas Department of Transportation, to implement similar land management practices through education and incentives.

Strategy 2: Reclaim public space and prioritize green infrastructure

Identify and reclaim mono-use, underused, and unconventional public spaces to increase community access and ecological function — such as utility easements, road rights-of-way, stormwater wet ponds, and cemeteries — with a focus on green infrastructure.

How we'll get there:

- Ensure that these reclaimed spaces are done thoughtfully and are contextually sensitive. For example, utility easements may be more suited for prairie plantings than trees. For cemeteries, the intent should not be to change them into something different. Still, with a bit of extra care and thoughtfulness, these spaces could provide appropriate opportunities for increased use or ecological function while also enhancing respect, reverence, and remembrance. This work should be done in partnership with the communities connected to the cemeteries physically, emotionally, and historically.
- Engage communities in identifying, re-imagining, and leading implementation on activating these spaces by funding and expanding the Community Activated Parks Program.
- Support the implementation of green infrastructure throughout the city by prioritizing funding for projects that maximize multi-benefits for human and ecological health.
- Focus on creating connectivity via continuous green corridors or transects that allow species habitat and migration and support an overall increase in ecosystem health. Look to use urban creeks and waterways as the natural basis for these linkages by naturalizing engineered waterways, especially in East Austin, as appropriate.
- Convert non-functional or unnecessary impervious cover to green infrastructure, green spaces, or natural vegetation that provides open space access or ecosystem functions. This should especially be done on City lands, such as parks with underutilized parking areas. A study should be conducted to look at the use of surface-level parking lots on City property to develop a plan to convert an ambitious percentage of these to functional green uses when feasible.
- Retrofit conventionally landscaped areas to create green infrastructure or landscapes that restore or regenerate ecosystem function. Explore how more functional green space can be incorporated into rights-of-way via the City's Complete Streets program and the Green Streets concept.
- Link this action with the City's efforts to relocate residents out of floodplains, which provide opportunities for reclaiming areas as natural or working lands currently being used for residential development.
- Include programming and signage in public spaces to clarify the intent and benefits of natural areas to improve community understanding.

Strategy 3: Promote community stewardship

Promote community stewardship and management of neighborhood public lands to ensure higher levels of care and maintenance.

How we'll get there:

- Establish Neighborhood Stewardship Councils or Ambassadors. These could be created with existing or new neighborhood associations, nonprofit organizations, community groups, and Indigenous communities that coordinate volunteers to implement projects that improve the health, biodiversity, and resilience of public lands.

- The City should provide paid training and opportunities for community members or groups to serve as Stewardship Ambassadors. These Ambassadors could provide quality assurance at neighborhood parks and community gardens, conduct training and education for community members, and act as primary contacts for coordination of volunteers and City resources. An example is the [Austin Water Wildlands Volunteer Land Steward](#) program. These ambassadors should be compensated for their time.
- Reference the Urban Sustainability Directors Network's [Case Studies for Community Driven Environmental and Racial Equity Committees](#).
- Create and implement simple, transparent, and consistent processes for community members to voice and help solve issues related to parks. This should include hearing from residents on what they value about the parks and green spaces in their neighborhoods, how they are currently using them, and how they would like to use them in the future. This can help identify the assets to focus on and build on.
- Create a Parks and Recreation Department Grant Assistance Program to eliminate private funding barriers to parks improvement projects in systematically excluded communities. Seek initial annual funding of at least \$500,000.
- Create new staff positions to proactively connect with systematically excluded communities and help individuals navigate processes and programs such as the Community Activated Parks Program, Community "Park"nerships, Adopt-a-Park, the Neighborhood Partnering Program, and others related to natural areas acquisition, stewardship, and restoration.
- In collaboration with community groups, develop land stewardship plans to help prioritize and align the natural areas management activities of volunteers, organizations, and City staff.
- Facilitate parks as spaces of celebration for neighborhoods by reviewing and potentially loosening restrictions on vendors and prioritizing allowance for local vendors.
- Community fears or concerns around the effects of parks and green spaces on crime or gentrification in their neighborhoods are real and valid. The City should focus on partnerships, outreach, and stewardship to improve the relationships between communities, nature, and the City.
- Continue to strengthen relationships with the Austin Independent School District and support the expansion of land stewardship and education in their curriculum using resources such as the [Cities Connecting Children to Nature program](#).

Strategy 4: Promote carbon farming

Explore the ability of food forests and community gardens on public lands to use low-carbon and carbon farming practices. This agricultural practice can improve carbon sequestration rates in agricultural systems and aid in plant growth, reduce fertilizer use and improve soil water retention.

How we'll get there:

- Support local research on carbon farming practices, especially in partnership with local higher education institutions or organizations that work with individuals from low-income communities and communities of color.

- To reduce any burden this imposes on community members, the City should provide basic oversight, technical assistance, startup resources, and ongoing maintenance at these gardens. This could be done through City staff or by funding outside groups, community-based organizations, or Stewardship Councils/Ambassadors to provide these services.
- Encourage private residents to implement similar food production and carbon farming practices in their yards through education and incentives.

