



**City of Seattle**  
Urban Forestry Commission

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**Date:** October 17, 2024  
**To:** Council President Sara Nelson, Councilmember Rob Saka, Councilmember Tammy J. Morales, Councilmember Joy Hollingsworth, Councilmember Maritza Rivera, Councilmember Cathy Moore, Councilmember Dan Strauss, Councilmember Robert Kettle, Councilmember Tanya Woo  
**From:** The Urban Forestry Commission  
**Subject:** Urban Forestry Recommendations regarding the 2025-26 Proposed Budget  
**Cc:** Mayor Bruce Harrell, Acting City Budget Director Dan Eder, Council Central Staff Director Ben Noble

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Dear City Council,

The UFC writes to share its recommendations on the Mayor’s proposed 2025-26 biennial budget as it relates to urban forestry. Recommendations in this letter include the following sections:

- I. Introduction
- II. Recommendations for refining urban forestry monitoring and budget reporting
- III. Budget recommendations to advance Seattle’s canopy and equity goals
- IV. Considerations for future urban forest funding

**I. Introduction**

The UFC endorses the two funding additions in Mayor Harrell’s proposed 2025-2026 budget that will improve urban forest management. The UFC appreciates that, despite this year’s challenging budget context, no funding cuts or position reductions that would clearly reduce the City’s urban forest management capacity from current levels were observed.

However, current funding levels for urban forestry appear to be insufficient to meet the City’s tree canopy cover and equity goals. This is suggested by the observed [tree canopy cover decline](#) on all land use categories in recent years and the worsening tree canopy inequities due to ongoing higher-than-average canopy loss in Environmental Justice Priority Communities. To this end, the UFC recommends several additions to the Mayor’s proposed budget. At a high level, these budget recommendations include:

1. Maintain \$680,000 to establish and maintain a publicly owned tree nursery included in the Mayor’s proposed budget (SPU).
2. Maintain \$100,000 for climate impact data analysis and reporting, including urban forestry included in the Mayor’s proposed budget (OSE).

3. Add funding so departments who manage trees on City-owned property (e.g. SDOT, SCL, Parks, SPU) have sufficient resources to inventory all trees they manage and keep those inventories updated on an ongoing basis.
4. Add funding so departments have sufficient resources to meet the 3:1 replacement requirement in Mayor Harrell's [One Seattle Tree Plan Executive Order](#).
5. Add one-time funding to study what resources would be required for SDOT to assume maintenance and care of all street trees.
6. Consider the impacts on future canopy potential of the proposed reduction of \$440,000 in Seattle Parks and Recreation's New Park Acquisition Program before making this reduction.

The UFC thanks the City Budget Office and the Office of Sustainability and Environment for joining our October 9 meeting to provide an overview of the City budget process, an overview of City work in urban forestry, and to highlight urban forestry-related items in Mayor Harrell's proposed 2025-26 budget. The UFC understands that difficult decisions were made to balance the budget in response to the significant projected budget deficit looming in 2025. The reality of these budget cuts will be felt most acutely by those whose jobs will be eliminated and their families. The UFC encourages the City to provide as much job transition support as possible to affected staff.

The remainder of this letter provides more detail on the topics described in this summary.

## **II. Recommendations for Refining Urban Forest Monitoring and Budget Reporting**

Understanding Seattle's overall investment in urban forestry is an ongoing challenge. In 2023, The Office of Sustainability and Environment prepared an [Urban Forestry Expenditures Report](#) that provided a high-level overview and baseline of City spending on urban forest management. Mayor Harrell's [One Seattle Tree Plan Executive Order](#) calls for annual reporting on key urban forestry metrics and biannual reports on urban forestry budget and staffing. The UFC continues to support City efforts to develop a more comprehensive process for tracking urban forestry-related expenditures, allowing for better monitoring of investment over time and easier identification of funding gaps.

To further inform understanding of how budgets align with management actions, **the UFC recommends that outcome monitoring be aligned with budget reporting in ways that increase our understanding of whether and how budgets are achieving desired outcomes.** This type of budget data is necessary to understand the resources required for the city to meet its canopy coverage and equity goals.

Specifically, the UFC recommends additional detail in areas such as:

- Itemization of urban forestry funding, particularly in areas like tree planting and establishment.
- A breakdown of departmental responsibilities for urban forest management, along with direct management costs by department.
- How many trees each department is responsible for managing and the resources dedicated to managing and inventorying these trees.
- A finer level of detail on urban forest management and budgets by department, including but not limited to budget information on the following types of activities:
  - Tree planting and establishment
  - Tree removal, including by cause (i.e. hazard tree removal, removal due to development, removal due to utilities or infrastructure interference)

- Tree pruning, including by purpose (i.e. for tree health or to prevent interference with utilities/infrastructure)
- Code enforcement, including by jurisdiction (e.g., parks, right-of-way, private property, etc).

The UFC appreciates your attention to these suggestions in future budget and data reporting.

### III. Budget Recommendations

The UFC acknowledges the challenges of the 2025-26 budget, and the difficult decisions that the Mayor and Council are required to make to create a balanced budget. The UFC endorses the two elements in the Mayor’s proposed budget that increase funding for urban forestry. It is with the future of climate resilience and canopy equity in mind that the UFC recommends additional investments in urban forestry, even in the face of the challenging budget decisions in front of the City Council. Our specific recommendations include:

1. **Maintain \$680,000 included in the Mayor’s Proposed Budget in SPU to establish and maintain a publicly owned tree nursery.** The Trees for Neighborhood program gives away 1,000 free trees for planting on private residential property. Private property owners are critical partners in growing our urban forest and when they can assume the costs of tree care, they can save the city thousands of dollars per planted tree. Scaling this program would be beneficial, but a major challenge is sourcing a diversity of tree species that are resilient to climate impacts and disease and that can thrive in urban conditions. A publicly owned tree nursery will help stabilize tree supply for the program, increase the diversity of tree species on offer, support green jobs, and support the City’s tree canopy equity goals.
2. **Maintain \$100,000 included in the Mayor’s Proposed Budget in OSE for climate impact data analysis and reporting, including urban forestry.** Data and reporting to increase transparency and accountability have long been priorities of the UFC. The UFC endorses this addition, intended to integrate urban forestry data and information that is currently dispersed across multiple reports, maps, and interfaces, into a single, publicly available technology resource. This tool will better track Seattle’s urban forest over time in response to changing environmental conditions and ongoing management. The UFC looks forward to collaborating with OSE and other urban forestry departments to comment on their scope of work as this project gets developed.
3. **Fund departments who manage trees on City-owned property with sufficient resources to inventory all trees they manage and keep those inventories updated on an ongoing basis.** An inventory of all trees managed by the City, including but not limited to departmental responsibility for maintaining each tree, their size, type, and location is fundamental to understand trends and patterns in our urban forest, promote species diversity, mitigate for disease and pest risk, etc. The UFC recommends consulting with departments who manage and maintain trees (e.g. SDOT, Parks, SCL, SPU) to understand what budget is necessary to ensure consistently updated inventories.
4. **Fund departments to meet the 3:1 replacement requirement in Mayor Harrell’s [One Seattle Tree Plan Executive Order](#).** The UFC supports the 3:1 planting requirement put forward by this Executive Order, and understands from the 2023 [Urban Forestry Expenditures SLI report](#) that

implementing this EO requires additional staff for planning, planting and maintenance, and operating funding for water and equipment, and that as more trees are added to the City's portfolio, the ongoing maintenance need increases. The UFC recommends consulting with Departments subject to this EO (e.g. SDOT, Parks, SCL, SPU) to understand what resources are necessary to fully implement the 3:1 replacement requirement.

5. **Add one-time funding to study what resources would be required for SDOT to assume maintenance and care of all street trees.** While SDOT approves permits for all trees in the right of way, they maintain and care for only a small portion of those trees. Primary care for a majority of our street trees is the responsibility of adjacent property owners. This system creates inequities, disproportionately burdens lower income residents, disincentivizes tree planting in the right of way, and leads to inconsistent care or neglect of trees where owners are unaware of or uninterested in the responsibility. Assigning stewardship responsibilities of all trees in the right-of-way to SDOT could protect investments in planted trees and create more equitable and consistent outcomes for all street trees. Some cities (e.g. [San Francisco](#), Washington DC) have moved to having their departments of transportation manage all street trees. The UFC recommends funding a study to understand the budget and operational resources needed for SDOT to take over management of all street trees and the tree canopy and environmental justice outcomes that could be achieved through such an action.
6. **Consider the impacts on future canopy potential of the proposed reduction of \$440,000 in Seattle Parks and Recreation's New Park Acquisition Program** before proceeding with this reduction. Park space provides opportunities to retain existing trees, plant new trees, and meet urban forest equity and open space goals. New acquisitions could enhance the City of Seattle's canopy coverage and support the city's climate resilience and equity goals, particularly in underserved areas that lack sufficient greenspace. While the budget reductions for land acquisitions are understandable given the current financial constraints, it is important to recognize that reducing investment in park acquisition could limit the city's ability to meet long-term urban forestry and open space goals. Future efforts should ensure that strategic land acquisitions continue to prioritize areas with the greatest need for greenspace, tree canopy, and equity benefits.

#### **IV. Considerations for Future Urban Forest Funding**

The UFC recommends that the City consider what new or creative funding sources may be available to bolster our urban forestry efforts.

1. **Seek new funding sources, and investigate creative funding approaches.** The UFC understands that roughly [\\$25 million was budgeted](#) for urban forestry uses in the 2024 endorsed budget. While the UFC does not have a benchmark to assess this against peer cities or against the total budget necessary to meet our canopy goals, some important metrics suggest it is inadequate. [Tree canopy is declining citywide](#), tree canopy cover inequities are worsening, and climate and urban stressors make tree planting and maintenance more expensive and survivability less certain. The UFC applauds the City for [securing federal USDA grants](#) to increase canopy equity. The UFC believes the City should be aggressively seeking new funding sources—large grants, levies, bonds—to ensure it can deliver on canopy and equity goals. The [Urban Forestry Special Charge](#) implemented by Madison, Wisconsin, offers a useful model; this charge is collected as

part of the municipal services bill and provides a dedicated funding stream for urban forestry. Implementing a similar approach in Seattle could significantly bolster our efforts to maintain and expand our urban forest.

2. **Incentivize urban forestry projects within existing City grant programs.** Seattle has numerous [grant programs](#) and many community-based organizations doing innovative urban forestry projects. The UFC recommends that these grant programs, in their outreach and grant evaluation criteria, consider ways to incentivize or prioritize community urban forestry projects for funding.

In closing, thank you for your attention to our recommendations and for the work you do to support the critical work of City departments in managing Seattle's urban forest. Resourcing the City's urban forestry efforts is critical to meet our Citywide canopy and equity goals.

Sincerely,



Josh Morris, UFC Chair

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