

# Seattle Urban Forestry Commission

## 2015 Annual Report

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### Introduction

The Urban Forestry Commission continued to fulfill its mandate to advise the Mayor and City Council on policies and regulations governing the protection, management, and conservation of trees and vegetation in the City of Seattle. The Commission continues to make recommendations to encourage City decision-making to recognize the urban forest as a critical piece of our urban infrastructure.

The Commission's primary objectives are:

- To support implementation of the Urban Forest Stewardship Plan's goals:
  1. Create an ethic of stewardship for the urban forest among City staff, community organizations, businesses, and residents.
  2. Strive to replace trees and enhance specific urban forest functions and benefits when trees are lost, and achieve a net increase in the urban forest functions and related environmental, economic, and social benefits.
  3. Expand canopy cover to 30 percent by 2037.
  4. Increase health and longevity of the urban forest by removing invasive species and improving species and age diversity.
- To provide feedback and recommendations to City Council and the Mayor on specific policy actions that will ensure the long-term health and viability of Seattle's urban forest; and
- To provide a forum for public dialogue to assist the Commission in its advisory role.

### 2015 Accomplishments

2015 was another productive year and the Commission was honored with visits by Mayor Murray and Councilmember Bagshaw. Commission issued letters of recommendation in support of Seattle's Comprehensive Plan Update, Environmental Critical Areas update, and several initiatives by Seattle Parks and Recreation. Topics discussed and acted on included:

#### Seattle's Comprehensive Plan Update and Draft Environmental Impacts Statement (EIS)

The Commission issued letters of recommendation for the Comp Plan update and its Draft EIS. After reviewing the draft 2035 Comprehensive Plan, the Commission was glad to see that urban forestry related goals and policies were incorporated throughout the document. The Commission provided a number of comments and additions it believed would strengthen how the Plan addresses urban forestry issues.

The Commission addressed concerns about the draft EIS for the 2035 Comp Plan, including: Impacts on the urban forest due to increased density; inadequate tree protection in the current code; and removal of the current 40% canopy cover long-term aspiration goal. The Commission expressed concern that the draft EIS doesn't address a number of impacts that could be caused by the different growth scenarios as a result of tree canopy loss from increased development.

Seattle's urban forest is an important piece of the City's environmental health, economic vitality, and social wellbeing, which are central to Seattle's quality of life and the goals of the 2035 Comprehensive Plan.

### Cheasty Greenspace Hydrology Issues

The Commission sent a letter of recommendation on April 2014 sharing some concerns about the Cheasty Greenspace Mountain Bike Trail Pilot Project. In 2015, the Commission received public input both for and against the project and on March 11, 2015, members of the Commission participated in a site walk of the Cheasty Greenspace in the general vicinity of the proposed bike trail. The Commission issued a letter of recommendation stating that additional study and consideration of potential impacts were necessary. The Commission recommended performing geotechnical exploration to evaluate soil and groundwater conditions in the vicinity of the proposed trails and assess the wetland hydraulics; Monitoring of wetlands for an appropriate period of time as recommended by an experienced wetland biologist to understand the variability in wetland hydraulics, which would then serve as a baseline for evaluating the effects of the project on the wetlands; and in addition to establishing the baseline for the pilot project impacts to the wetlands, there should be a mechanism for feeding that information into the project design process.

The Commission stressed the fact that wetlands play an important role in the function and value of the urban forest and appropriate measures should be taken to preserve the wetlands in their natural state. Affecting the hydrology of the site's wetlands could negatively impact the urban forest.

### Parks Draft Supplemental Use Guidelines for Natural Areas and Greenbelts

The Commission issued two letters of recommendation regarding Parks Draft Supplemental Use Guidelines for Seattle Natural Areas and Greenbelts. The first letter was addressed to the Seattle Board of Park Commissioners. In the letter, the Commission expresses its opposition to the Parks current Draft document because the Commission believes the draft is contrary to the 1993 Greenspaces Policy (Resolution #28653) adopted by City Council and is unbalanced in favor of new uses and unclear on how decisions will be made.

The Commission recognizes the potential benefits of allowing additional uses to build constituencies for the protection and preservation of natural areas, so long as the new uses are consistent with existing City Council approved policy and there are clear specific criteria for evaluating new uses in effect.

The second letter was address to Mayor Murray and Councilmember Bagshaw encouraging City Council to get involved in Parks' process to engage in a broader conversation to determine whether or not Seattle residents would support changing current policy. The Commission appreciates the work Parks has done to incorporate its recommendations, yet the Commission believes that the main issue remains: the Supplemental Use Guidelines as written contradict existing City policy.

### Arboretum Multi-use Trail

The Commission is aware that this project is part of the 2001 Washington Park Arboretum Master Plan where the City agreed to work with our University of Washington and Arboretum Foundation partners to provide a space for the Arboretum collection to be located, and that Seattle Parks and the Arboretum have done extensive public engagement around this project. The Commission commended the Parks Department for the intensive effort to move some of the trees, propagate those that can't be moved, and applying the City's Two-for-One Tree Replacement Policy to the project in a manner that is consistent with City policy.

After several Parks briefings the Commission issued a letter of recommendation stating that it still had concerns about the tree canopy cover loss due to the sheer number of trees to be removed to accommodate the 14 ft. wide trail. Of the 168 trees to be removed, 65 are native species. 50 are 18” or greater in caliper. The eight largest trees to be removed are natives between 36” and 50” in caliper. The Commission also recommended re-assessing the needs of Seattle residents in order to update the Arboretum Master Plan in a way that the document better represents City priorities in terms of increasing canopy cover and preserving open space.

Preserving mature trees, especially native species, in Seattle’s dense urban environment is challenging. There are few locations where Seattle’s large conifers can thrive without growing onto overhead power lines, or causing damage to underground utilities and sidewalks, or causing sightline issues in our rights-of-way. In order to accomplish the Urban Forest Stewardship Plan’s goal of 30 percent canopy cover the City should focus tree conservation efforts on locations that provide sufficient soil and don’t present infrastructure conflicts such as Parks land and the Arboretum.

### Support of Urban Forestry City and Partner Programs and Efforts

The Commission was pleased to hear briefings from and provide input to important efforts in support of Seattle’s urban forest including OSE’s work on the Monitoring Framework for the Urban Forest Stewardship Plan; Stormwater Code update; SDOT’s Tree and Sidewalks Operations Plan; Seattle reLeaf and its Trees for Neighborhoods and Tree Ambassador projects; the Green Seattle Partnership; Pollinator Pathway; and City Fruit.

### Urban Forestry Commission/Urban Forest Inter-departmental Team Annual Meeting

The Commission and the Urban Forest Inter-departmental Team had their 2014 annual meeting at Camp Long. The goal of the meeting this year was strengthening the partnership between the groups in order to accomplish the goals of the Urban Forest Stewardship Plan. Following up on last year’s 4H Challenge Course, the meeting focused on the High Ropes Challenge Course as a team-building exercise lead by facilitators from Camp Long.

### Commission Membership

Two new members joined the Urban Forestry Commission in 2015: Richard Martin (Position 4 - Hydrologist) and Mariska Kecskes (Get Engaged Position). Gordon Bradley (Position #3 – Natural Resources Agency or University Representative) and Jeff Reibman (Position #8 – Development Community or non-City Utility representative) finished their second terms. Interviews for both positions took place on December with interview panel appointment recommendations currently under consideration. Commissioner Joanna Nelson de Flores was reappointed for a second term to Position # 7 – Non-governmental Organization representative. Tom Early was elected chair for 2016 with Steve Zemke serving as vice-chair.

### Conclusion

The Commission continued to support the accomplishment of the City’s urban forestry goals by providing input to important efforts such as the 2035 Comprehensive Plan Update, Parks Supplemental Use Guidelines as well as to specific projects such as Cheasty Greenspace and the Arboretum multi-use Trail. We look forward to continuing to work together with the Urban Forest Inter-departmental Team, the Mayor, and City Council to protect and enhance Seattle’s green infrastructure.

The Commission is pleased to have continued to build rapport with the members of the City's Urban Forest Inter-departmental Team by identifying shared goals and ideals, and recognized the complexities of managing Seattle's urban forest, and to have provided a forum for discussions of the values and concerns for trees, vegetation, and habitat in Seattle.

**2015 Commission Members:**

- Leif Fixen, Chair: Arborist —Position #5
- Tom Early, Vice-chair: Landscape Architect—Position #6
- Steve Zemke: Wildlife Biologist—Position #1
- Donna Kostka: Urban Ecologist —Position #2
- Gordon Bradley: University Representative (UW)—Position #3
- Richard Martin, Chair: Hydrologist —Position #4
- Joanna Nelson de Flores: NGO Representative—Position #7
- Jeff Reibman: Development Community Representative —Position #8
- Erik Rundell: Planner—Position #9
- Mariska Kecskes: Get Engaged Position #10

**Contact:**

Additional information about the Urban Forestry Commission can be found at [www.seattle.gov/urbanforestrycommission](http://www.seattle.gov/urbanforestrycommission), or by contacting:

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