

URBAN FORESTRY MASTER PLAN 2023 PROGRESS REPORT



About the Urban Forestry Master Plan

The Columbus Urban Forestry Master Plan (UFMP) is the first Citywide, strategic plan to invest long-term in Columbus' trees. Approved by Columbus City Council in April 2021, the UFMP will guide the entire Columbus community to prioritize, preserve and grow our tree canopy. We have three tree canopy goals: 1.) Reach Citywide Tree Canopy Cover of 40% by 2050, 2.) Stop the Net Canopy Losses by 2030 and 3.) Invest in Equitable Canopy Across All Neighborhoods by 2030. We will accomplish these goals through four strategies: community coordination and collaboration, best practices, dedicated resources and stronger policies. This report details the progress made to date on these four strategy areas.

Community Coordination and Collaboration

New Tool to Prioritize Tree Plantings Based on Equity

National nonprofit American Forests developed a Tree Equity Score Analyzer (TESA) for Columbus and Franklin County, in partnership with community members led by local nonprofit Green Columbus. This interactive map-based tool shows how targeted tree plantings can benefit areas with the greatest need, down to the parcel level. The tool shares the newest canopy cover data for Franklin County with the public. TESA will empower Columbus organizations and residents to use data on our tree canopy and community to plan tree plantings to create the biggest impact and reach tree equity goals, including customizable property-level planting plans. Engaging stakeholders to build this tool was an early effort of the Columbus Tree Coalition.

See UFMP Action Items 5.1, 5.3 and 6.5

New Program to Plant Trees on Private Property

Most available planting space in Columbus is located on land owned by residents and businesses. To support planting trees on private property, Columbus Recreation and Parks Department's Forestry section funded a pilot program for 2024. In partnership with the Franklin Soil and Water Conservation District, five awards of \$2,000 each will be made to community organizations to purchase trees and planting supplies. See UFMP Action Items 5.1, 5.3 and 6.5

See UFMP Action Item 4.1

Tree Walk with an Arborist

In 2023, Columbus Park of Roses at Whetstone Park was named a certified Level II arboretum by the Morton Arboretum in Chicago. As part of that designation, Arborist Chad Hoff led a tree walk for the community on Oct. 3 at Columbus Park of Roses. Approximately 30 participants were taught how to identify trees in the park, as well as common issues and attributes with different species.

See UFMP Action Items 2.4 and 5.4

Best Practices

Writing a New Best Practices Manual

The department received feedback on Columbus' first Tree Technical Manual from a public comment period and a City Council public hearing in September. Comments were overwhelmingly supportive. Of the 149 written comments received, 60 percent expressed support for the code. Other themes were concerns about tree loss due to development (38 percent) and the need to preserve mature trees (26 percent). The department is finalizing the manual in 2024, and enforcement will begin Aug. 1, 2024.

See UFMP Action Item 9.1

Planting Trees Equitably

Investing in equitable tree canopy is an important goal of the UFMP, and Forestry staff prioritize planting trees in neighborhoods where trees are needed most. Of the 3,079 trees the department's Forestry section planted in 2023, 67 percent were planted in priority Census tracts in the UFMP equity analysis. Columbus continues its commitment to national best practices and was recognized by the Arbor Day Foundation for the 44th year as a Tree City USA.

See UFMP Action Item 6.2

Dedication of Resources

Street Tree Inventory Completed

Columbus Recreation and Parks Department's Forestry team manages more than 125,000 street trees! Over the past three years, the department invested in its tree data by physically visiting each street tree and capturing locations, species and condition. For the first time, planting spaces were also collected to inform future planting efforts. A total of 225,982 sites were inventoried; of those, 96,000 are planting sites available to plant trees in Columbus. This information is key to proactively managing a healthy urban forest, and it shows that there are so many opportunities to plant even more trees in Columbus!

See UFMP Action Items 8.2 and 13.4

Funding for Implementation

During 2023, the department added \$2 million to its annual capital budget to support Forestry contracts and staff. Additionally, Google donated \$125,000 to support urban reforestation efforts in Columbus in September. The department plans to use the donation to plant trees in Three Creeks Park in the Far South to enhance a wetland restoration project. The UFMP Implementation fund at the Columbus Recreation and Parks Foundation continues to receive donations to support progress from donors including the Crane Group and private residents.

See UFMP Action 11

Improving Proactive Tree Care

Forestry continued to improve operational efficiencies by hiring more staff to meet the City's growing urban forestry needs. A two-person stump crew will now grind stumps in-house, increasing responsiveness and the rate that trees can be replanted after removals. Forestry also regionalized service requests, by dividing the City into four quadrants managed by a regional arborist who conducts inspections and assigns tree care work to crews. Staff piloted a "blitz" program to focus multiple crews for several days on one park, which allowed them to complete necessary pruning and removals at three parks: Duranceau, Goodale and Italian Village.

See UFMP Action Item 8.1

Stronger Policies

Public Tree Code Updates Passed

Columbus City Council passed the brand-new public tree code at the end of 2023! The new code strengthens protections for trees growing on City-owned property, like street trees and park trees. The code had last been updated in 1991, making these changes the first in over 30 years!

- ▶ If a public tree has to be removed, steps are required to make up for the loss of that tree—a practice called "tree mitigation." Mitigation can take the form of replanting or payment into a tree fund, at an inch-for-inch rate. Every diameter inch of public trees that are removed will now result in the same inches replanted, a substantial increase in required tree plantings from previous policies. For example, a 20-inch diameter tree will now require 10 2-inch trees to be replanted.
- ▶ Mitigation will now be required for all projects. In the past, some projects didn't require any tree preservation or replanting, directly contributing to tree canopy loss over time. The new code removes these exemptions, ensuring all construction and utility projects on City property must comply with the tree mitigation requirements.
- ▶ Forestry staff will inspect trees during construction to enforce best practices up to five times, before, during and after construction is complete to ensure public trees are protected and newly-planted trees survive.
- ▶ A companion manual carrying the force of code will be finalized in 2024. This is important because the department can both provide detailed guidance on meeting code, and the manual can be updated more frequently than City code, making it a living document that can change with advances in the forestry industry. This new public tree code supports the City's canopy goals, particularly to stop net canopy loss by 2030.

See UFMP Action 15





2023 City Forestry Numbers



3,079

trees planted



3,937

trees pruned



1,234

hazardous trees removed



984

tree emergencies handled



5,228

requests for tree planting or care received

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