

Issues in ARBORICULTURE A Bridge to Planners

by Jim Schwab, Senior Research Associate, American Planning Association

The community comprehensive plan, and the process for creating it, is a municipal arborist's best opportunity for institutionalizing a commitment to trees and forests from the ground up. The plan becomes the reference document for maintaining community character and shaping future growth and development.

To strengthen relationships between forestry, arboriculture, and planning at the community scale, a new Planning Advisory Service report, *Planning the Urban Forest: Ecology, Economy, and Community Development*, has been created. For professional planners and commission members, it provides the basic principles needed to establish and maintain robust urban forests and green infrastructure as a foundation for long-range municipal planning.

The U.S. Forest Service supported the project in cooperation with the Sustainable Urban Forest Coalition, and specifically the American Planning Association, American Forests, and the International Society of Arboriculture. The 280-page document includes chapters that frame issues and opportunities, outline general and specific principles, present more than a dozen case studies, and conclude with specific recommendations on green infrastructure and goal-setting for tree canopy cover. Appendices include existing model plans and the fundamentals of establishing and protecting the urban forest.

The principles are worth outlining here for your consideration and action. This project will only be successful if you bring these principles forward to professional planners, community leaders, and responsible commission members, and create a sense of urgency around their adoption and integration with existing and future policies and practice.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

1. Get trees to the forefront of the planning/ visioning process

Trees should not be an afterthought in the planning process. Instead, because they play an important role in helping communities solve numerous problems simultaneously, they need high-priority attention in any community visioning or goal-setting process.

2. Know where you came from to know where you are going

To frame a community vision for the urban forest, planners should work together with urban

foresters to document the history of the local urban forest as an ecosystem, rather than just a collection of trees.

3. Seek out private and civic partners

Although the community may have more direct public control over municipal lands like parks, the urban forest would be sparse indeed if parks and rights-of-way were the only places where trees appeared. Ultimately, true success in maintaining the urban forest depends on the continuing support of homeowners, businesses, and leagues of dedicated volunteers.

4. Investing in trees makes economic sense

Increasingly, communities realize that green infrastructure is a low-cost, long-term investment that reduces much greater expenditures in gray infrastructure.

5. Urban forestry must be sustainable financially

Many communities view tree programs as cost centers: the goal is to hold costs down. The movement toward quantifying the economic benefits of trees at all levels (direct economic benefits but also indirect savings from environmental, health, and psychological benefits) suggests an entirely different model focused on trees as a wise public investment strategy—and through this lens, as a profit center.

PLANNING PRINCIPLES

1. Incorporate the tree ordinance in the development code and ensure consistency with other codes

Too many tree ordinances are stand-alone laws not incorporated into zoning, subdivision, or other development codes and so go unnoticed by the development community.

2. Collaborate with developers, environmentalists, and other stakeholders to draft ordinances

Planners do not know or need to know enough about trees to decide exactly what species is right in a particular setting, or how best to preserve an entire grove on a development site.



Municipal arborists must engage planners early enough to integrate trees with future policies and practice. Embarcadero Park, San Diego, Photo: Brett Shoaf

3. Planned Unit Development regulations should include an urban forestry evaluation checklist or guidelines

Developers prefer clear guidelines even if they involve more stringent requirements. It's important that communities simplify compliance by summarizing requirements in checklists or visual design guides so developers understand more easily what is expected.

4. Ordinances must include provisions for enforcement personnel

One way to almost guarantee failure is to enact a program of planting and conserving trees on development sites without incorporating the resources needed for effective oversight.

5. Take an adaptive management approach to resources

Regular review of ordinances and regulations with an eye to lessons learned ensures that new findings and best practices in managing the urban forest will be incorporated.

6. Plan for long-term maintenance of trees

Short-term budget cuts undermine the long-term success of urban forestry programs—deferred maintenance results in tree die-offs. Long-term success needs planning and investment procedures such as audits, tree inventories, equipment studies, and staffing reviews.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES:

1. Use urban forestry to support other planning goals

Many of the sustainable best practices that are changing development practice include trees, parks, and green infrastructure to make them work. Planners should actively seek these linkages when working on other issues and then use trees to support those broader public policy goals.

2. Include a green infrastructure element in the local comprehensive plan, but link it throughout other elements in the plan

Any feature of the natural environment that provides ecological services to the community is a fit topic for a green infrastructure element. The community must have a full picture of the value and utility of its natural resources.

3. The natural environment is part of making neighborhoods livable

The benefits of trees in making a neighborhood livable extend beyond creating pride and a distinct sense of place, as important as those may be. Trees create a welcoming environment beneficial to public health and safety.

4. Make the place right for trees and then pick the right trees

The wrong tree in the wrong place with inadequate care is doomed. Its failure can undermine public support for urban forestry as a productive investment.

To view and order the publication, visit:

www.planning.org/forestry 