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214-2022

Communication

Requested Agenda Type

Communications

Request of Noelle Studer-Spevak to address Council regarding street tree maintenance

Placed on File

A brief description of Communication: Care about justice? It's time for Portland to fund street tree maintenance. Cities across the country do it, and Portland can too. Everybody deserves shade in a heat wave

Agenda Items

214 Communications in [March 30, 2022 Council Agenda](#)

Placed on File

From: [Noelle Studer-Spevak](#)
To: [Council Clerk – Testimony](#)
Subject: Today's Council Communications - Documents for the record
Date: Tuesday, March 29, 2022 10:44:45 PM
Attachments: [FamiliesForClimateCC.pdf](#)
[ShadeEquityCoalitionMarch16.pdf](#)

Hello Council Clerk,

I have two documents to submit related to March 30 Council Communications.

The first are my remarks, plus a table of links to tree maintenance programs in cities around the country.

The second is a letter that the Shade Equity Coalition sent to council members directly on March 16, but we never added it to the record.

I'm not completely certain how to sign in to speak Wednesday morning but I'll search my inbox.)

Thank you so much,

Noelle

--

Noelle Studer-Spevak *(she/her)*

[Families for Climate](#) Board of Directors, 503.358.2055

Settler on unceded land of the [Cowlitz](#), [Cascades](#) & [Clackamas](#) Chinook peoples



March 30, 2022

Portland City Council Communications

Mayor Wheeler and City Commissioners,

My name is Noelle Studer-Spevak. I live in the Cully neighborhood and I'm speaking today on behalf of Families for Climate, a Shade Equity Coalition member organization.

In my former life, I worked in SDOT's city arborist office while studying urban forestry and public administration. I've been reluctant to jump into Portland's tree world because it's a big nut to crack – it's dispersed throughout 5 bureaus and, along with our form of government, it is need of a systemic overhaul.

As you learned from the tree canopy report on March 16, heat islands are expanding and there is a 13 degree summer temperature disparity between low-income and wealthy neighborhoods. Analysis after the June heat disaster found that 50 deaths were correlated with these heat islands. We are heading in the wrong direction and no one has the answers. But I can tell you with certainty, that:

- relationships among tree-related bureaus and organizations are badly eroded,
- there is insufficient public oversight, and
- solutions lie in moving toward a deeply collaborative, community-based approach to tree care.

Presently, public street tree maintenance is a burden left to adjacent private property owners. Some can afford the maintenance burden and some cannot, foregoing shade. On March 16 our coalition sent each of you a letter signed by 14 organizations urging the City to resume the process of implementing the street tree asset management strategy first proposed in 2009, and again in 2017.

As a first step, Commissioner Rubio, we are specifically requesting that your office earmark \$50K of the proposed \$3M ARPA resilience budget request for trees to contract with a firm to analyze the best ways to fund street tree and tree-related sidewalk repairs.

Maintaining public tree infrastructure is not a new idea. Most cities of Portland's size in the United States have been caring for trees as public assets with regular pruning for many decades. Most cities in the Great Lakes region have been doing this for 50+ years. Eugene and Corvallis also prune their street trees. In the following cities, public works or transportation crews also repair sidewalk damage related to tree roots: Boston, Detroit, San Francisco, Baltimore, Milwaukee, DC, Charlotte, Fresno, Los Angeles. Please find a table below with hyperlinks to the programs and non-profit partners in these cities.

We do not expect you and your staff to be experts in this area, but we will not rest until you devote some attention to preventing future heat-related deaths. Currently, no bureau is charged with curbing heat islands. Members of our coalition are ready to meet with each of you to discuss next steps. Brenna Bell of 350PDX has been diligently attempting to get on your calendar. *You can help by asking your scheduler to reply to her messages.*

This is a time when we need all-hands-on-deck to plant and maintain trees to eventually shade our streets. Without action, come fall, this will be the first tree planting season in 15 years that Portland has no dedicated funding for community-based street tree planting. There are hundreds of committed tree planting volunteers in neighborhoods throughout the city all trained up and ready to go – with no programs. *We encourage you to assure that a portion of ARPA funds are leveraged with non-profit partnerships to mobilize community-centered street tree planting. We cannot afford to fail. This is it. This is the time to set up the next 2-3 generations with protective tree canopy.*

This is where your leadership is needed:

- **Commissioner Rubio**, please earmark \$50K to find funding for universal shade tree care & related sidewalk repair. Your staff has been more responsive than any other – thank you - we're hoping for a meeting soon.
- **Commissioner Hardesty**, please insist that PBOT make space for trees so that generations of heat disparity are not locked in by the recently proposed 4' planting strip of the PDG. There is a [public hearing April 4](#) at 3:30pm on this topic.
- **Commissioner Mapps**, for 14 years BES has been a leading force in growing climate-adapted trees for Portland and leveraging community-based partnerships planting over 50,000 street trees. Please encourage them to resume this successful work that was curtailed in 2021.
- **Commissioner Ryan**, your scheduling auto-responder says this is outside your list of priorities. But we know that this work is dear to hundreds of neighborhood volunteers. We hope you will consider coming up to speed on tree issues because BDS is currently not checking to see if the right trees are actually installed in new development. That means that there were good intentions in creating regulations, but they are not being enforced.

We look forward to meeting with you and answering any questions you may have.

In solidarity,

Noelle Studer-Spevak, MPA, MS Urban Forestry
noelle@familiesforclimate.org

Throughout the United States, leading municipal tree programs care for street trees and surrounding sidewalks. It's time for Portland to manage its public street trees, too.

Most medium to large cities throughout the United States fully manage street trees and leverage public dollars with non-profit tree planting & community engagement partners. Here are some examples:

City Website	Major Non-Profit Partner	Street Tree Map	Pop. 2012	Sidewalk Repair program
Boston Parks & Recreation	Speak for the Trees Boston	*Interactive Speak for the Trees map	620K	Public Works repairs sidewalks
New York City Parks	Trees NY Citizen Pruners Forest for All NYC Coalition	*NYC Interactive Street Tree Map & App	8.3M	Cool Neighborhoods NYC - \$82M for Street Trees Trees & Sidewalks
Philadelphia Parks & Recreation	TreePhilly	*PhillyTreeMap Interactive	1.5M	Homeowners responsible for sidewalk repair
Detroit General Services Dept. (not sure about proactive pruning)	The Greening of Detroit	*Interactive Map	701K	If a sidewalk is damaged by a city tree, Public Works may repair it
San Francisco Public Works	Friends of the Urban Forest	Street Tree Map includes date last pruned	826K	Street TreeSF repairs sidewalk damage near trees
Tree Baltimore - Umbrella org for all city depts & non-profits	Baltimore Tree Trust	The Baltimore Tree Inventory	621K	City Footway Section repairs sidewalk damage due to street trees.
Milwaukee Forestry Services, Public Works	Greening Milwaukee	Emerald Ash Borer Map	599K	City repairs sidewalks
Washington, D.C. District Department of Transportation	Casey Trees	D.C. Street Tree Map	632K	City repairs sidewalks
Charlotte, NC General Services	TreesCharlotte		741K	City repairs sidewalks
Fresno, CA Dept of Public Works	Tree Fresno	Transform Fresno community project map	506K	City repairs sidewalk damage due to street trees.
Eugene, OR Parks & Open Space Urban Forestry Program	Friends of Trees	Street Tree Map - flags special trees	172K	Adjacent property owner repairs sidewalks
Los Angeles, CA Public	TreePeople	Tree Keeper Map	3.8M	Public Works provides

Works	LA County tree canopy			sidewalk repair
Columbus, OH Toledo, OH Gainesville, FL Corvallis, OR			809K 284K 132K 54K	
Pacific Northwest cities are generally new to street tree maintenance.				
Portland, OR leaves street tree maintenance to the <i>adjacent property owner</i> . Parks has limited planting & 3-year maintenance through its opt-out program in some low-canopy neighborhoods.	Limited partnership: Friends of Trees (yard trees only & some young street tree pruning through FY 22)	Tree Inventory Project	603K	Adjacent property owner responsible for sidewalk repair

Funding Options

[American Public Works Association](#)

[Vibrant Cities Lab](#)

Street Tree Basics

[The Families for Climate shade equity resource list](#)

Portland's approved [street tree planting lists](#). If Portlanders want cool, shaded streets, we need to plan for sufficient space (6') to plant large-form trees. 4-foot planting strips = hot neighborhoods. This is PBOT's new plan.

[Yale Forest Forum's 2022 Spring Seminar Series](#): (40-minute videos)

- [Principles of Urban Forestry](#)
- Climate Change & Urban Forest Policy & Action - [International Perspectives](#) (inspiring)
- [New York City's street tree management program](#) (800,000 trees)
- [Urban Forest Planning for Future Climate Scenarios](#)
- Benefits/drawbacks of the two [canopy measurement methods](#) described by Parks (sampling) and PSU (high-resolution census) - minute 5
- Two forthcoming talks cover canopy inequity and how to take demographics into consideration when planning tree planting.

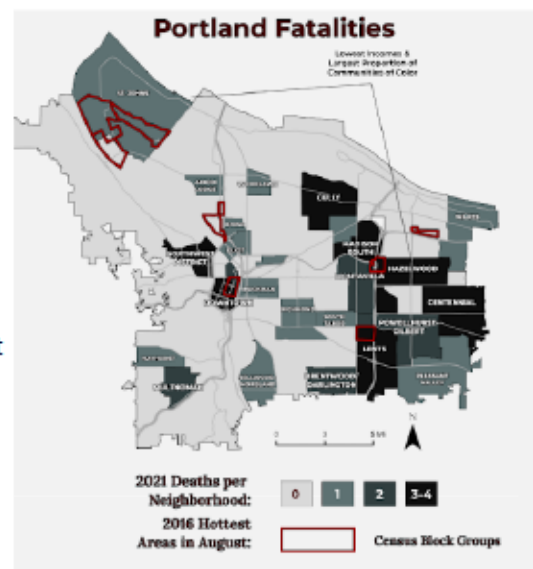


March 16, 2022

Dear Mayor Ted Wheeler and Portland City Commissioners;

We, the undersigned organizations, urge the City to resume and expedite work to improve shade equity in Portland which it began thirteen years ago. In 2009¹ and again in May 2017, scientists, urban forestry experts, Portland’s Urban Forestry Commission and the tree advocacy community proposed that the City Council create a Right of Way (ROW) and *Street Tree Asset Management Strategy* to set Portland on the course to minimize urban heat islands and provide shade for all. This included a Council work session in November 2017 that left everyone pleased and hopeful about next steps. Unfortunately, the City took little further action, while extreme heat events and shade inequity both intensified.

It is important to clarify that Portland’s urban forest is divided into four management categories: 1) trees in public natural areas & parks, 2) public trees in street ROWs throughout the City, 3) trees on residential land and 4) trees on industrial land. According to 2002 data, street trees and commercial/industrial lands were the furthest from meeting canopy targets. While the City made some large investments in park tree maintenance this year, the delay in implementing a *Street Tree Asset Management Strategy* has increased health and safety risks for low-income community members living in local heat islands. Recent data from Dr. Vivek Shandas indicates that from 2014-2020 existing heat islands expanded, and tree canopy declined, in 29 of Portland’s 30 most populous neighborhoods. **Worst of all, there are no plans to aggressively reverse the trend – even after five dozen Portlanders perished in the June 2021 heat dome.** The cost of inaction also includes the foregone services of cooling, air filtration, stormwater management, access to nature, safer



¹ [Initial Assessment of the Costs of Managing Street Trees as a Public Asset](#), June 2009.

bike/ped corridors, and improved public health outcomes, which an expanded urban tree canopy – especially by large-form trees – would have provided.

Portland leaders are juggling housing and policing crises, while deep climate resiliency preparedness has been sitting in the corner.² At the core of street tree inaction is a failure to account for trees as appreciable infrastructure assets that provide increasing services over time. Fortunately, there is a clear path forward. We can follow the lead of the [many cities](#) across the U.S. that invest in their right-of-way tree infrastructure through robust canopy expansion partnerships, funding street tree planting and full life-cycle maintenance. Like the urban tree canopy, Portland’s street tree stewardship has [much room for growth](#) (2017 presentation).

The problems, as defined in 2017, have not changed:

1. Portland has no street/right-of-way tree maintenance program and city code requires adjacent property owners to maintain public property (Title 11, Trees).

Consequences:

- Inequity: Many Portlanders do not have access to the cooling, air filtration, and other benefits of tree canopy. Summer temperatures in low-income, low-canopy areas can be 13 degrees F higher than those in Portland’s wealthier, high-canopy areas. [See the chart at the 2:05 mark [in this clip from The Daily Show with Trevor Noah](#)]
- Lower income, elderly residents, small business owners and landlords are reluctant to plant street trees due to increased labor and high long-term maintenance costs.
- There is a backlog of street trees in poor condition from lack of professional care, creating public safety hazards and costly emergency response activities after storm and wind events.
- Life expectancy, ecosystem services, and the value of street tree assets are reduced by a lack of long-term professional care.
- Street tree establishment rates are not as high as they could be. The trend of hotter, longer summers increases the need for maintenance to improve tree survival rates.
- Street trees are not tracked/accounted for closely like other valued city assets.
- The City can’t use capital funds to create and establish tree infrastructure as it is currently categorized in the budget.

2. Street trees are not adequately prioritized in street/ROW improvements and new development.

Consequences:

- Street trees are often removed during development.
- Currently, Urban Forestry staff and community members are responsible for making the case to preserve individual street trees. They must propose ways of avoiding tree removal (rubber sidewalks, meandering sidewalks, relocating infrastructure, or redesigning a street or development). **This is backwards; preserving trees should be the norm in Portland. PBOT (and ODOT) engineers should bear the burden of justifying removal.**
- Areas with unimproved ROWs are at high risk of tree loss when sidewalks are installed. This is of special concern in East Portland, which has seen a historic disinvestment in pedestrian infrastructure.
- Best practices in preventing tree-sidewalk conflict are not standard protocol.

² [In early January 2022, City Council](#) did approve a \$10 million PCEF grant for Earth Advantage to install heat pumps in low-income households.

- PBOT specifies narrow furnishing zones, which are insufficient for planting the large-form street trees, which are necessary for mitigating local heat islands.
- Trees are seen to be in competition with sidewalks, utility vaults, water lines, bike parking, signs, etc.
- Private property owners are replacing large street trees with small-form trees, even in wide planting strips.³

While the problems remain the same, the context has significantly changed.

In addition to the stark realization that the climate crisis is upon us causing an urgent need for emergency adaptation measures, COVID, the houseless crisis, and the 2020 racial justice movement helped more people recognize the many injustices that pulse through Portland. These include deep income and racial disparities evident in the social determinants of health, which refer to lack of access to jobs, healthcare, good schools, wealth-building opportunities, as well as a history of racist zoning and land use patterns. We now know that many of Portland’s tree-deficient neighborhoods correlate with historically redlined areas.⁴

This ongoing injustice demands a proactive, community-focused government response. The urban tree canopy will not flourish by simply hiring more city workers to plant and maintain trees. Growing a vibrant urban ecosystem requires community investment and ownership, job training, relationship building, and administering resources to support youth development. Establishing a strong street tree maintenance program citywide can help Portland accomplish all of these. It is imperative that City bureaus support a collaborative approach to achieving canopy expansion and equitable distribution goals, and fully leverage city resources to build capacity for community-based street tree maintenance and job training.

Moving Forward

It’s time to pick up the ball dropped in 2017 and resume the essential work to: 1) recognize trees as appreciable assets, 2) create a plan to assume full legal and financial responsibility for ROW, street trees, and tree-related sidewalk repairs; 3) ensure sufficient space for large-form street trees in all City plans; and 4) work in partnership with community-based organizations that are ready for this long-overdue investment in human and natural capital. [Other cities](#) have done it, and Portland can, too.

Of all the plans made in 2017, one thing *was* accomplished: Portland Parks updated the 2009 Davey Tree study referenced earlier with the title, [“Managing Street Trees as Green Infrastructure - Cost Assessment.”](#) This report is an essential resource but does not recommend strategies for funding street tree management⁵ or include the cost of tree-related sidewalk repairs. We understand that Portland Parks and Recreation’s Sustainable Futures team is exploring options for the City to assume street tree maintenance at some point in the future, but we believe the urgency of this issue calls for an expedited process that includes robust community participation in both creation *and* implementation.

³ Residents’ motivations have not been studied, but people suspect it is, in part, due to perceived risk, long-term financial liability, and/or leaf cleanup hassles associated with med- and large-form trees, which provide the lionshare of benefits. This is another reason to elevate the role of the City in managing trees in street ROWs.

⁴ Hoffman, J., Shandas, V., Pendleton, N., The Effects of Historical Housing Policies on Resident Exposure to Intra-Urban Heat: A Study of 108 US Urban Areas, *Climate* 2020, 8, www.mdpi.com/journal/climate.

⁵ American Public Works Association, [“Budgeting & Funding: Urban Forestry Best Management Practices for Public Works Managers.”](#)

This year, while Portland is making critical investments in climate resiliency, we urge the City to build on the Davey report by funding an investigation of City-led street tree management financing options. As part of the spring 2022 biennial budget-making process, Portland Parks proposes to spend \$3 million over two years to plant 6,000 trees in east Portland using American Rescue Plan Act funds. We agree that more tree planting is needed in Portland, but planting alone will not get us to our climate goals - we need long-term investment in community-based tree care. While we support this PPR budget request, we ask that the City spend \$50,000 of these monies on an economic study to investigate financing alternatives for the City to assume responsibility for long-term street tree maintenance.⁶

To help Portland residents take pride in and ownership of their nearby street trees, we also encourage the City to migrate [the street tree inventory](#) to an interactive community science platform. Tools such as OpenTreeMap can help neighbors grasp the ecosystem services provided by each tree, see empty planting sites as potential for growth; individuals can also update or add missing tree data and take condition notes. [New York's system](#) even allows pedestrians to report a maintenance issue such as a needed sidewalk repair, using a smartphone app.

We recognize that accomplishing these policy objectives and building a campaign to secure the necessary funds will require an integrated strategy developed by community leaders, urban forestry advocates, workforce development proponents, the public health sector, businesses, pedestrian and multimodal transportation advocates, environmental and climate justice organizations, neighborhoods, and other stakeholders. We intend this letter to begin these discussions. We will contact you shortly to set up meetings to discuss how **you can support the rapid completion of this urgent legacy work. The next generations are counting on us to get this right.**

In solidarity,

Brenna Bell, **350PDX**
Noelle Studer-Spevak, **Families for Climate**
Kyna Rubin, **Trees for Life Oregon**
Derron Coles, **The Blueprint Foundation**
Heather Keisler Fornes, **Portland Fruit Tree Project**
Yashar Vasef, **Friends of Trees**
Ted Labbe, **Urban Greenspaces Institute**
Samantha Hernandez, **Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility**

Maia Vasconez-Taylor, **OPAL Environmental Justice**
Sergio Lopez, **Verde**
Diana Meisenhelter, **Extinction Rebellion PDX**
Amy Henrikson, **Portland Youth Climate Council**
Sarah Iannarone, **The Street Trust**
Debra Higbee-Sudyka, **Oregon Chapter Sierra Club**
Micah Meskel, **Portland Audubon**
Kiel Johnson, **BikeLoud**
Gregory J Wolley, **Creating Tomorrow's Workforce**

⁶ We have spoken with a contractor who provided this \$50,000 ballpark estimate and encourage council members to include this in the budget discussions that are underway.