

Comments of David Ahrens to Parks Commission on Urban Tree Task Force Report: 9/4/19

If we agree on the necessity of preserving our trees on public and private land and increasing the size and distribution of the canopy from its current 23% to a much larger number than the substantive question is, “What strategies are most effective towards accomplishing that goal?”

After two years of informed discussions, the Task Force on Urban Trees developed a substantial number of recommendations across a wide swath of topic areas.

The presentation tonight represented a series of recommendations as they relate to the urban forest and zoning and planning and was prepared by a member of the zoning and planning departments. As you will note from the report, this is a fraction of the report as a whole and I would argue, subsidiary to the development of a meaningful strategic plan.

Director Knepp’s identified a few of the key recommendations in his analysis. The following are responses to the comments most relevant to the city’s parks..

First, is our recommendation to establish an urban tree education and outreach program. As noted in the report, most of the trees in the city are on private property, specifically on residential property. If we are to substantially increase the level of canopy in the city, this is where it must occur. If we are to maintain our current canopy, this too is where it must happen. Thousands of ash trees are on private property but we have no information on how many property owners have sought preventive treatment, trees’ current condition and for those that have been removed, if the owner has or is planning to replace it.

If we are to move our common agenda forward, we should encourage and support tree plantings and care. In cities that are engaged in efforts to increase their tree canopy, the creation of an outreach and education program are central to their effort. These cities have recognized, as have the members of the Task Force, that Madison has neither the space or resources to really “move the needle” in terms of adding and replacing tens of thousands of trees.

These tasks cannot be done as an adjunct to another job. It is more than a full-time job. It is an education position that answers the question, “Why have a tree?” as well as elements of tree care. In addition to education, it would **initiate and support** efforts to create citizen organization to support our trees on each block, each neighborhood park and the city as a whole. The Clean Lakes Alliance has been effective in supporting the recovery of our lakes and the same kind of effort is needed for trees. In summary, this is another area, where city government cannot do this alone but requires popular efforts. But is essential for the city to start the initiative.

Second, is the recommendation to plant 2,000 trees per year for the next five years. Knepp notes in his analysis that it is impractical because it would require more funding for trees as well as more personnel. That is correct. If we decide to immediately reject any strategy for

enhancing the tree canopy that requires additional funding, then we will do little to increase the tree canopy in public spaces.

(Note, that this recommendation would address all public land such as stormwater, streets, etc. If the city offered free trees for private land that too would accrue to the total as well.)

In regard to the effect on parks, it is reasonably noted that parks serve a multitude of purposes and that adding 2,000 trees might defeat those purposes. Certainly, if the trees were planted willy-nilly throughout parks, that would indeed be the case. We would hope that park planners would use good sense in these operations.

However, we differ with the view expressed by some staff that there is “no room” in the parks for additional trees. This may entail a broader discussion of how our parks function. If you consider the composition of many of our parks, it is apparent that there are vast spaces that can accommodate small wooded areas that would then offer wildlife support.

I am most familiar with parks on the eastside. Many of the large parks- Glacier Hill, Kennedy, Hiestand, Olbrich and others- are vast lawns surrounding soccer fields and a few ball diamonds. These parks-except for their perimeter- are largely devoid of trees. Could there be one or more dense stands of trees in each of those parks, of course, not at the bottom of a sledding hill or in the middle of a soccer field? This requires us to rethink what parks should look like and what they should be.

Other areas, such as stormwater areas are also often without trees despite the importance of trees in absorbing stormwater. For example, the block-long greenspace (much of it prairie) stormwater culvert feeding into Starkweather Creek is connected to Eastmorland Park which are both tree-less.

I should add that in last year’s budget I added an amendment providing \$500,000 for the purpose of enhancing our urban tree canopy. None of those funds were used. Those funds were recommitted in the 2020 budget. We could plant 2,000 trees with those funds. The question is whether the Parks Dept. will use it for that purpose. If it remains unused it will be returned to the General Fund.

The third area not addressed is how the recommendations should be evaluated and implemented. As an Alder for six years, I received many studies, reports, etc. with specific recommendations but they were filed and their ideas languished. The reason for their loss was primarily because no Alders or committee or task force was available to press them forward. Currently, The Parks Commission lacks a subsidiary committee that addresses our urban forest. The establishment of a Forestry Sub-committee could have the capacity to move the most important recommendations forward and with it, the critical goal of maintaining and developing our urban forest.

Two additional notes:

Listen to this story from All Things Considered on neighborhood income as a factor in tree canopy and exposure to heat. **This story includes a map of Madison.**

<https://www.npr.org/2019/09/04/755349748/trees-are-key-to-fighting-urban-heat-but-cities-keep-losing-them>

This story on a research study that it's not just a greenspace that makes people feel better but a greenspace with a tree canopy.

https://www.citylab.com/environment/2019/07/urban-tree-canopy-green-space-wellbeing-research/595060/?utm_source=newsletter&silverid=%25%25RECIPIENT_ID%25%25&utm_campaign=citylab-daily-newsletter&utm_medium=email

If you would like to respond to these comments or the report, you can contact me at:

dmahrens@gmail.com