

Urban Forestry Task Force seeks to enhance city's tree canopy

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Marla Eddy, Madison city forester, under a tree that has been pruned around utility lines along Drake Street. A special Urban Forestry Task Force is looking at ways to diversify and enhance the city's tree canopy, including the possibility of putting more high-voltage power lines underground.

JOHN HART PHOTOS, STATE JOURNAL

In a short walk on the Near West Side, Madison city forester Marla Eddy sees challenges and opportunities to growing the city's precious tree canopy.

On a block on Drake Street, she notes the heavy pruning necessary to keep an otherwise towering tree from touching power lines.

Down the street, she shows newer crab apples, planted because they won't grow nearly as high so they won't reach the same wires, despite being in a wide terrace that could otherwise support a bigger tree.

And up South Orchard Street, she points out the skinny terrace with inadequate soil volume where the roots of larger trees could someday damage sidewalk and curb.

As Eddy describes challenges and potential, the city is in the midst of a deep look at how to preserve, diversify and expand its tree canopy — a covering already threatened by the emerald ash borer — with the promise of improving aesthetics, removing air pollutants, lowering home heating and cooling costs, capturing stormwater and raising property values.

For a year, a special nine-member Urban Forestry Task Force has been examining challenges, reviewing policies, practices and programs and exploring best practices and new approaches in preparation of coming recommendations for both public and private property.

The task force should have final draft recommendations for city committees and City Council consideration in early 2019, said chairman Jeremy Kane, a private arborist and director of the nonprofit Urban Tree Alliance.

“We need to see a growing canopy,” Kane said. “Part of that happening is citizen commitment and citizen interest. This is a step in a larger process that’s going to happen.”

So far, main areas of focus have been:

- The review of policies, practices, programs and operations for the entire urban forest, including publicly and privately owned trees.
- Increasing dedicated soil volume for street trees in existing neighborhoods and new subdivisions, which can support tree roots and save on costs for sidewalk or curb repair.
- Increasing the tree canopy on private property, perhaps by requiring at least one tree be planted on new single-family lots in new subdivisions but with challenges in maintenance, replacement and enforcement.
- The possibility of burying more high-voltage power lines, particularly during street reconstruction projects.
- Creating an inventory of the tree canopy in neighborhood plans, which can aid in tree preservation, conservation and removal decisions.
- Creating an urban forestry master plan that would establish overall canopy goals for the city.

“This process has brought a healthy focus on the importance of the urban canopy,” Parks Superintendent Eric Knepp said. “There are a lot of things the community can look at.”

The city, Kane and Knepp said, has a significant urban canopy, with about 100,000 trees on street terraces and at least that many in parks, accounting for about 20 percent of the urban forest.

But the forest has challenges with some tree species and uneven coverage.

The city's program of treatment, removal and replanting of ash trees in public locations has not been matched by private property owners, Kane said. And a considerable population of silver maples is aging out, he said. "Two of our most common trees are facing a pretty significant challenge," he said.

Meanwhile, trees aren't evenly distributed across the city, with inequities connected to population density Downtown and some neighborhoods, as well as income levels, Kane said.

The task force, which includes two City Council members, three city staff and four residents, is looking to identify appropriate spaces for public trees, with factors including soil volume, overhead lines and width of terraces. The city's right of way has competition among traffic and bike lanes, sidewalks, bus stops and more, and the idea is to make trees an integral part of planning and to better align planning and oversight among multiple city agencies.

The city would also like to better encourage and provide incentives, and perhaps add some regulation, for planting trees on private property, Knepp said.

The city could also benefit from investment in an outreach/marketing program that underscores the value of the canopy, Kane said.

Broadly, "some of the recommendations will require funding, others won't," he said.

The biggest obstacles are likely to be short- and long-term funding for new initiatives, enforcement of new policies and practices, and that change can be seen as a positive or a negative, Eddy said.

Burying high-voltage power lines, for example, can bring many benefits but can cost between \$50,000 and \$500,000 for a city block, Knepp said.

To support the task force, the council approved \$500,000 to deploy "a variety of strategies aimed at strengthening the urban forest" in the 2019 capital budget. The uses may include, but are not limited to, a census of trees, remediation for trees damaged by late summer flooding, and Downtown canopy trees.

All together, the impact of coming recommendations could be profound, Eddy said.

"The implementation of the recommendations will mean that Madison will be covered by a resilient, diverse, robust urban forest supported by a broad-based community and informed residents," she said. "The entire community will recognize our urban forest as an important natural resource and be active participants in its preservation."