



Madison Parks Division

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TO: Board of Park Commissioners

FROM: Eric Knepp, Parks Superintendent

DATE: August 29, 2019

SUBJECT: Response to Urban Forestry Taskforce Report

Overview:

The Urban Forestry Taskforce has worked very diligently since December 2017 to prepare its final report. The Parks Division recognizes and appreciates the time and dedication from everyone that has been involved in the process. There is a significant amount of good information and ideas outlined in the report. The report emphasizes the importance of trees and looks at nearly all factors that impact the health and development of the urban forest as a whole.

Planning and Design:

There are many competing demands in the Right of Way and on all properties that impact the space available for growing trees. As with everything we manage, there needs to be a balanced approach to determining what takes priority in these situations and/or designing spaces that meet all of the needs (e.g. bike lanes, street widths, utility locations, private development needs, solar panels, etc.). In many situations, these will not be easy decisions. We agree that evaluating current policies, codes and ordinances to determine ways to protect, preserve and increase the urban tree canopy will be highly beneficial. There are a number of recommendations that look to address these concerns and will require further careful evaluation.

Increasing terrace width, addressing soil volume and quality issues, and identifying utility conflicts are of the utmost importance for a healthy street tree population. On page 20 under Street Design Recommendations, Recommendations 1-3 provide possible ways to ensure adequate volume and space for trees, while Recommendations 4 and 5 focus on undergrounding of utilities to allow for larger canopy trees to be planted. We see these as being critical factors in future conversations and budget and planning efforts.

Outreach and Education:

Public engagement will be critical in helping to preserve, protect and enhance the tree canopy on private land, which is approximately 85% of the total urban forest (page 21). It will also be critical to encourage private landowners to plant and care for trees on their property. While creating a staff person to help with these efforts and develop/manage a volunteer tree program could be beneficial, it may be possible for this workload to be absorbed if other resource needs are met in Forestry; there are needs for additional staff in other areas of Forestry that are more crucial.

Canopy Coverage

Parks agrees that a canopy coverage goal of 40% (Recommendation 1, page 23), is both achievable and critical to enhancing the quality of the urban forest. Many of the proposed strategies will help to achieve the goal. It is important to consider that it will require everyone to do their part, whether private or public.

Addressing equity issues is extremely important, and it is critical that these issues are recognized throughout the decision making process. Recommendations 3 and 4 on page 23 provide some insight on how we might go about eliminating disparities that have been created over time within the community related to the urban forest.

Forestry Operations & Public Land:

An up-to-date inventory of the tree canopy is going to be critical to effectively managing the urban forest in the future (Recommendations 2 and 3 on page 24 emphasize the importance of this). High priority should be placed on making sure that this is completed sooner rather than later. The most recent inventory of street trees is over 10 years old and has not been updated since it was created and Emerald Ash Borer (EAB) has been present, it will be critical to have a process in place to ensure that a new inventory does not become obsolete. With this, we believe that it is necessary to invest in technology, as indicated in Recommendation 14 on page 25, that will allow for staff of all levels to be able to do their jobs more efficiently and more effectively manage the urban forest. This recommendation should include creating a position in Parks for an IT staff person to support the creation and management of this GIS-based database inventory, along with other database/workorder systems under development in the Parks Division.

Increasing planting rates and decreasing the length of the district pruning cycle of street trees will require maintaining current staffing levels post EAB and potentially require additional staff and equipment resources. We are currently planting at capacity at current levels and are continuously evaluating our planting process to make it more efficient, and increasing the planting rate on the street without additional resources would detract from other important services, such as district and small tree pruning. Recommendation 6 on page 24 attempts to get at this.

From Parks perspective, Recommendation 7 on page 24 sets a very ambitious, and perhaps unrealistic, goal of “planting 2,000 more trees in parks above the replacement rate each year for the next five years.” While Parks does support maximizing the number of trees planted in parks, this goal as written does not seek to balance the needs of the park system as a whole. We need to be careful to examine not just the benefit of trees, but also the needs of park users. Our park system provides a multitude of amenities; some are existing, others are already identified in park master plans. Retaining space in parks for future park uses and facilities is critical to the success of the park system. This will ensure space for continued growth opportunities and the flexibility to provide park amenities and diverse uses that will change over time as our city evolves.

Protecting critical vistas and diversified habitat types as outlined in our adopted Land Management Plan is equally important to a healthy park system. As with the urban forest, the natural environment is healthier and more sustainable when it is diversified. In particular, many habitat types within Parks that are ideal for various pollinators, do not offer the same variety of

flora and fauna if densely shaded. In addition, we currently plant approximately 400 trees per season, planting significantly more trees would require additional resources or likely contracting out to plant and maintain the trees once installed to ensure success. It's important to provide a balanced approach to the recommendations for planting in parks.

While the Urban Forestry Taskforce Report includes a number of excellent recommendations, it may not be possible to act upon each of them for various reasons. It will be critical to identify top 3-5 priorities and develop cost and implementation plans to ensure that the recommendations are carried out in the near future. Beyond that it would be advisable to determine how other recommendations from the report may be implemented in the future.