



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council

FROM: Gregory I. Guernsey, AICP, Director
Planning and Development Review Department

DATE: February 20, 2015

SUBJECT: Comprehensive Urban Forest Plan (Resolution No. 20140828-081)

In August 2014 City Council approved Resolution 20140828-081 recognizing the need for a comprehensive approach to planning and management of Austin's urban forest to address urban forest goals established in *Imagine Austin*. This memorandum is a response to the following items included in that resolution : 1) Conduct an initial review of the staff, programmatic, and budgetary resources and needs to accomplish a consolidated tree program, and 2) provide findings and recommendations for developing a comprehensive urban forest plan to address the entirety of Austin's urban forest.

Austin's Urban Forest

Before proceeding with the response, we would like to provide a brief primer on Austin's Urban Forest programs. Since the early 1980s Austin has been a national leader in urban forestry and was recently recognized by American Forests (the country's oldest national nonprofit conservation organization) as a Top 10 Urban Forest in the country. Austin's urban forest management is principally divided into two areas: 1) planning and regulation by the Planning & Development Review Department and 2) operations and maintenance by various City departments with land management responsibilities (e.g. Public Works, Parks & Recreation, Watershed Protection, Austin Energy, and Austin Water).

1. *Conduct an initial review of the staff, programmatic, and budgetary resources and needs to accomplish a consolidated tree program*

In 2013 Council Resolution No. 20130627-070 directed staff to, among other tasks, determine the public value and benefits of the urban forest, evaluate and identify gaps in the level of care to public trees, and evaluate consolidating departmental tree programs. On November 2, 2014, in compliance with the interdepartmental recommendations associated with the executive report issued per Council Resolution No. 20130627-070 the Parks & Recreation Department (PARC) transferred the Urban Forestry functions and six FTEs to the Planning & Development Review Department (PDRD) to best achieve the City's vision, goals, and code requirements with respect to the urban forest and fulfilling the vision of the *Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan*. PDRD's goal is to integrate the two previously separate programs (City Arborist and Urban Forestry) into a consolidated community forest program that comprehensively addresses urban forest planning, promotion, education, preservation, and replenishment.

2. Provide findings and recommendations for developing a comprehensive urban forest plan to address the entirety of Austin's urban forest

In March 2014 the City Council approved *the Austin Urban Forest Plan: A Master Plan for Public Property*, a plan for management of trees and other vegetation on Austin's public properties. This plan pertains to approximately 15% of the lands within the city. During the public hearing process the Urban Forestry Board and Environmental Board identified the need for a plan to address the entirety of the urban forest. Board interests focused on ensuring that public education and outreach, assessing rules and regulation, and the form and structure of the urban forest were addressed in a comprehensive plan. Subsequently, Council Resolution 20140828-081 provided specific directives (see below) to develop an initial assessment for developing a comprehensive urban forest plan. A work plan and timeline has also been developed to address these specific directives (see below after 2f).

2a. Develop a Program to Educate and Inform the Community

Public education and outreach was a prominent consideration in the Environmental Board motion. Staff training and public education regarding tree care and maintenance, the benefits of trees and tree preservation regulations are some of the topics to be addressed. An education plan will be developed by an independent consultant or a full-time employee. PDRD tree-related programs generally consist of technical and planning staff and a consultant would provide added expertise to fulfill this resolution for education, marketing, and outreach activities. We believe that the highest and best use of independent consultant's expertise would be to provide guidance in developing public outreach objectives.

2b. Review City Rules and Regulations

CodeNext was initiated in September 2013 after the adoption of *Imagine Austin*. A final draft code will be available by late 2016 with the purpose of aligning City development regulations with policies in *Imagine Austin*. Codes will be addressed, as needed, through this process to ensure a comprehensive and consolidated approach.

2c. Perform a Literature Review of Urban Forest Programs and Regulations

A review of programs and regulations from Texas' largest cities (Dallas, Fort Worth, San Antonio, Houston, and El Paso) along with other nationally recognized urban forest programs (Charlotte, Denver, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, New York, Portland, Sacramento, Seattle, and Washington D.C.) will be assessed to identify best management practices for urban forest management and regulations.

2d. Collect Data and Develop Recommendations for an Annual Scorecard

Data generated through the permitting process will continue to be quality assured, analyzed, and used for annual reporting. This rich database of over 13,000 tree permits is currently being used to assess tree mortality rates, tree preservation and removal rates, track tree disease, development patterns, etc. During the summer of 2014 a first of its kind Urban Forest Inventory Analysis was conducted in Austin by the United States Forest Service, Texas A&M Forest Service, and in coordination with the City of Austin. This study sampled more than 200 plots to determine, among other metrics, tree species, tree size, tree condition, monetary value and ownership. The plots are fixed locations and will be reassessed over a period of years to learn more about how the urban forest changes. It is anticipated the data and preliminary analysis will be available in 2015.

The *Austin Urban Forest Plan: A Master Plan for Public Property* includes a report card that will be the basis for an annual scorecard for the comprehensive urban forest plan. The plan identified 30 performance criteria for public urban forest management. There will likely be additional criteria based on fulfilling tree preservation and public outreach objectives as part of this plan.

2e. Review Existing City Plans

Many City plans will need to be examined to ensure consistency and avoid duplicity. Of greatest priority, *Imagine Austin* will be the guiding document as trees and/or the urban forest are prominently

mentioned 46 times in the document. Staff will also incorporate the existing *Austin Urban Forest Plan: A Master Plan for Public Property* as one component of the proposed comprehensive urban forest plan. Staff has identified other City plans (e.g. trails, invasive species management, wildfire protection) that will need to be reviewed.

2f. Compilation of Tasks 2a-2e into a Comprehensive Urban Forest Plan

The compilation of these tasks will use existing resources to accomplish these tasks.

Work Plan and Schedule				
Item #	Description	Required Personnel	Completion Date	Estimated Hour Requirement
1	Develop a Consolidated Tree Program	Current FTEs	10/1/2015	50
2a	Develop a Program to Educate and Inform Community	Current FTEs and/or Consultant	1/1/2017	1000
2b	Review City Rules and Regulations	Current FTEs	1/1/2016	600
2c	Perform a Literature Review of Urban Forest Programs and Regulations	Current FTEs	1/1/2016	500
2d	Collect Data and Develop Recommendations for an Annual Scorecard	Current FTEs	1/1/2017	300
2e	Review Existing City Plans	Current FTEs	6/1/2016	400
2f	Compilation of tasks 2a-2e into a Comprehensive Urban Forest Plan	Current FTEs and/or Consultant	1/1/2016	400

I hope this provides useful information for your consideration. If you have questions or need additional information please contact Michael Embesi, City Arborist at either Michael.Embesi@austintexas.gov or (512) 974-1876.

Cc: Marc Ott, City Manager
Sue Edwards, Assistant City Manager