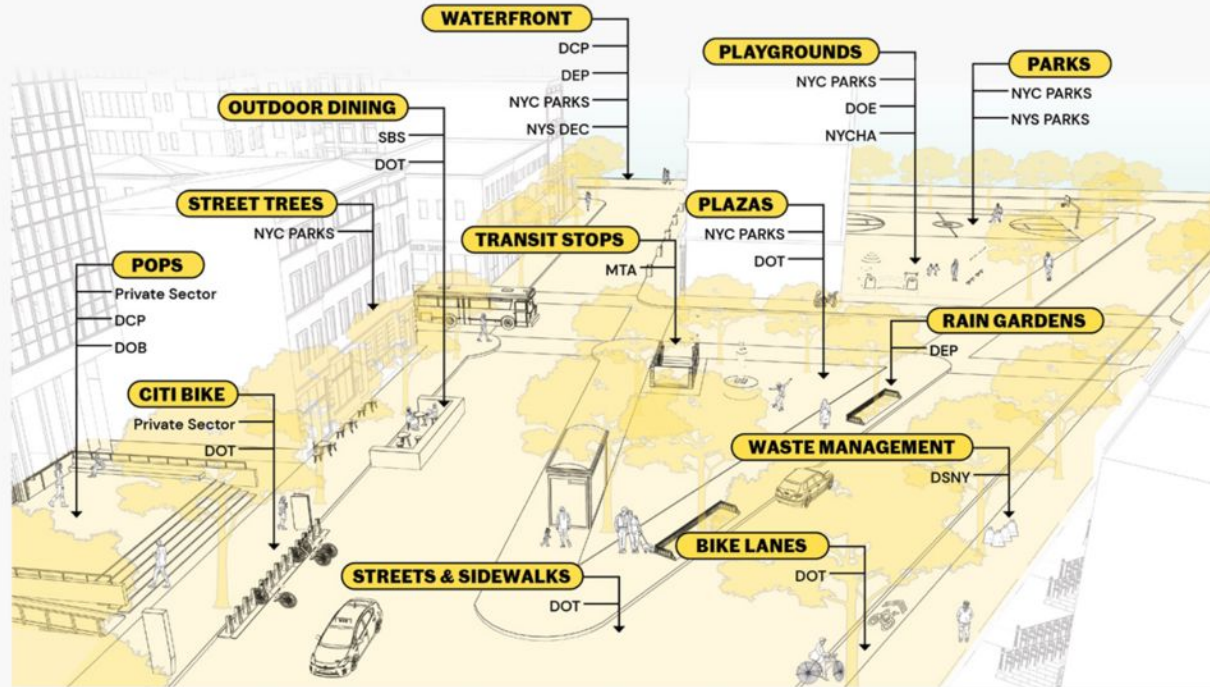


GREEN STREETS INITIATIVE

Street Trees Keep Austin Cool



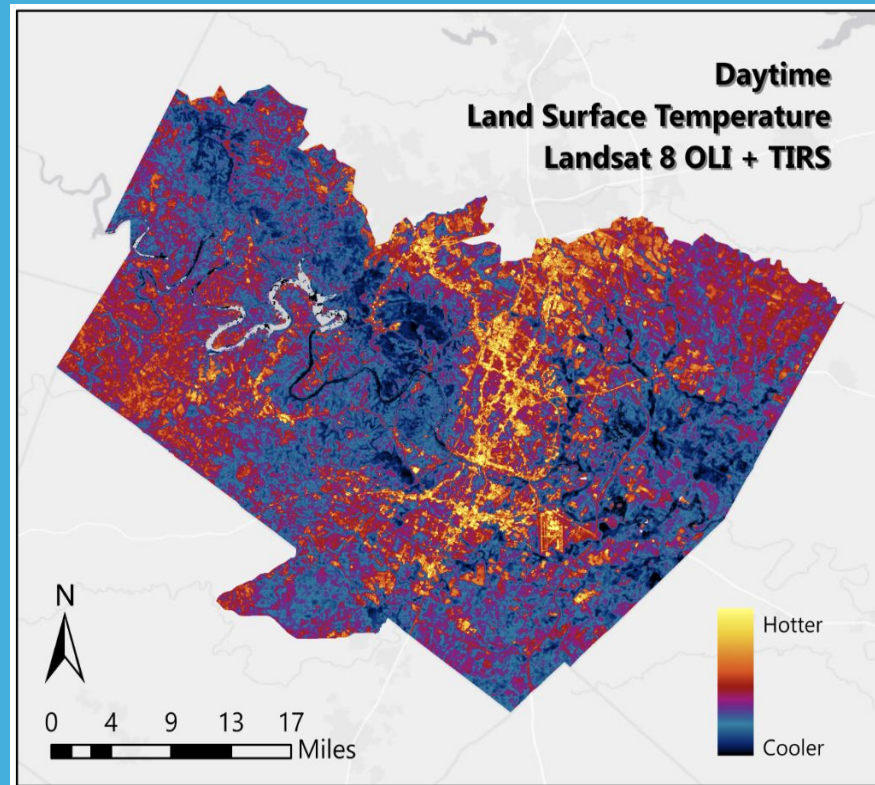
The jumble of key agencies and entities that oversee elements of the public realm. Rendering: MAS

March 26th, 2024

Prepared by: Kevin Howard (*Urbinden*) & Jana McCann, FAIA (*McCann Adams Studio*)

WHERE ARE OUR HEAT ISLANDS?

- The worst urban heat island effects follow our major street network.
- Yet, streets are how we get around, where we walk, bike, roll, catch transit - exactly where it must be cooler.
- AND, lower-income residents – who depend more on transit - live on the hotter, east side.
- The worsening heat islands are a major public health risk for everyone, but especially our most vulnerable communities.



Heat Map of Austin showing the **yellow**, hottest areas focused in East Austin and Downtown

WHY AUSTIN NEEDS GREEN STREETS

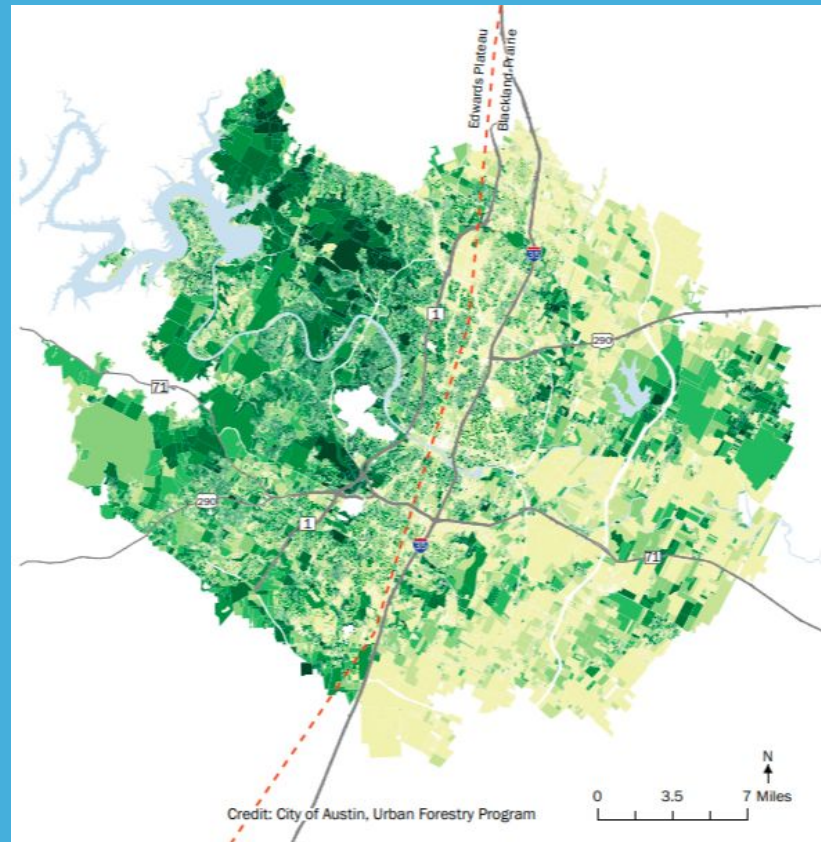
- Address challenges of densification and climate change using public rights-of-way.
- Less private yard space and busier streets mean that we will rely on trees in the public realm for health and public safety
- Increasing vegetation - particularly trees - is an effective way to make Austin more livable and resilient to the effects of climate change.
- Street trees are essential urban infrastructure, not just “nice-to-haves” or “beautification”



Example of continuous shade trees at curbside, providing both shade and protection from road for sidewalk users

WHERE ARE THE TREES?

- Austin over-relies on private yards and preserved natural areas for its urban forest, which are ***concentrated in wealthier parts of town.***
- Low-income and BIPOC communities are ***disproportionately impacted*** by extreme heat
- Yet, ***street trees are one of the most desired community benefits***, according to many public surveys and in the “Contracts with Voters” in recent bond elections.



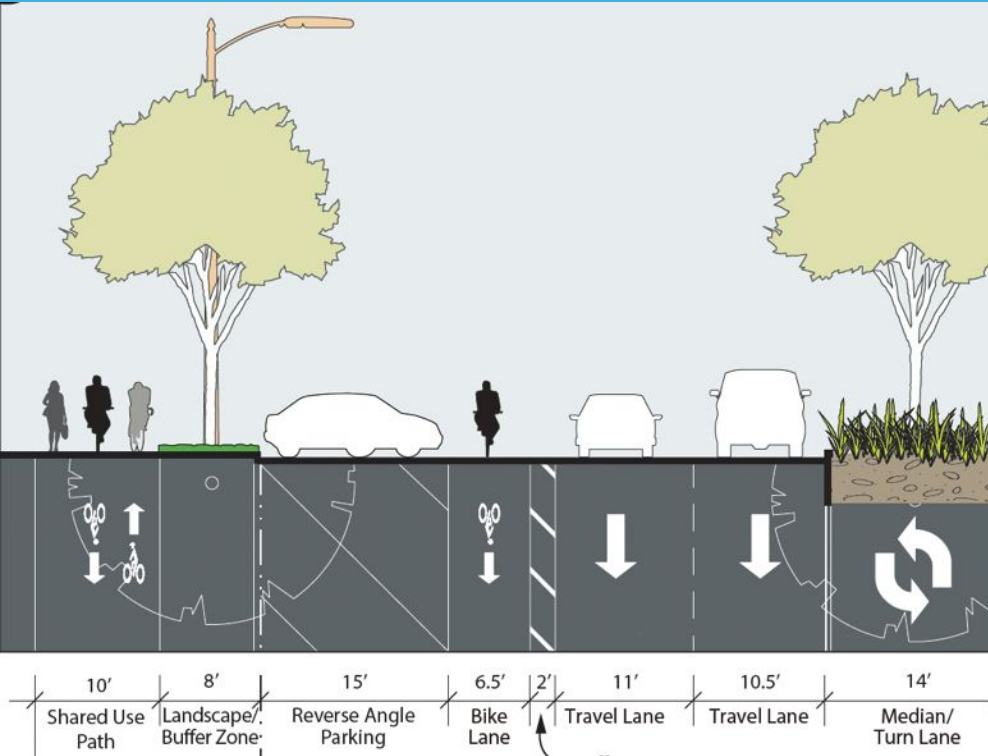
The City's Tree Canopy Map shows lack of "shade equity" on the east side.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

1. The **LACK OF LEADERSHIP** means that review staff are conducting reviews and making decisions, with little guidance and support. Departmental Silos preclude integrated and responsive urban design.
2. Austin's **RULES & REGULATIONS** are not aligned with City and community priorities: if they were, street trees would be required of most public and private development.
3. The **PERMITTING PROCESS** – eliminating license agreement process and reduce required discretion and inconsistent implementation.
4. It is more **EXPENSIVE** to plant street trees in public ROWs: we need to assure they can be subsidized for transit and affordable housing projects.

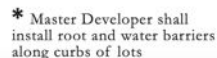
Street trees compete with utilities for space in the ROW and generally come out the losers – along with the community.

WHAT'S THE BUILT OUTCOME?



Above is what was designed (left) for the City's Corridor Construction Program for Airport Blvd near Koenig Ln, ...and what actually got built (right).

A photograph of a residential street. On the left, a large, mature tree with a thick trunk and dense green foliage stands on a gravel bed. A concrete sidewalk runs parallel to the tree. To the right of the sidewalk is a gravel area containing a small cactus. Further right, a house with a light-colored exterior and a dark roof is visible. A set of concrete steps with a black metal railing leads up to the house. The street is paved with asphalt, and a dark-colored car is parked on the left side. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.



**** Site Developer shall install root barriers at sidewalk**

1. Lack of Leadership

- *There is no single person or group responsible for ensuring that City policies are reflected in its rules and regulations*, and no one with the authority to marshal various ROW stakeholder interests in a way that achieves the best urban design and highest levels of community benefit.
- *Street trees are not treated as the critical public infrastructure they are*, and there is no shared vision for the kind of streetscapes that staff should be helping deliver to the community.
- Today, permitting and implementation is often led. by junior staff, without support or oversight by such a *“public realm coordinator”*. Staff should be afforded better training and clear tools to do their job.



Ya-Ting Liu is New York City's newly appointed chief public realm officer.

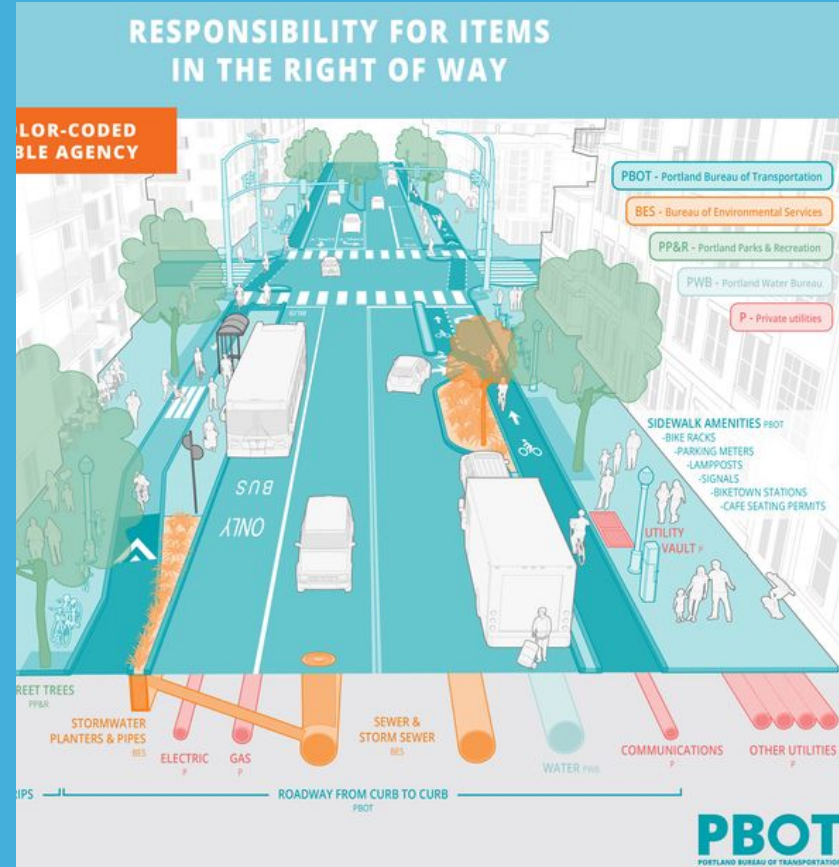
“Our city’s public spaces are too important to fall through the cracks of bureaucracy, and now they won’t,” Mayor Adams said.

Ms. Liu said that she saw her new job as being the “central point person” for city agencies and the public, in hopes of making it easier to create and maintain public spaces. “I think we want to provide more support, to make that process more seamless, less friction,” she said.

In 2023, NYC created a **Public Realm Officer** post in the Mayor’s office to coordinate and facilitate high-quality, public space projects.

1. Lack of Leadership: *Departmental Silos*

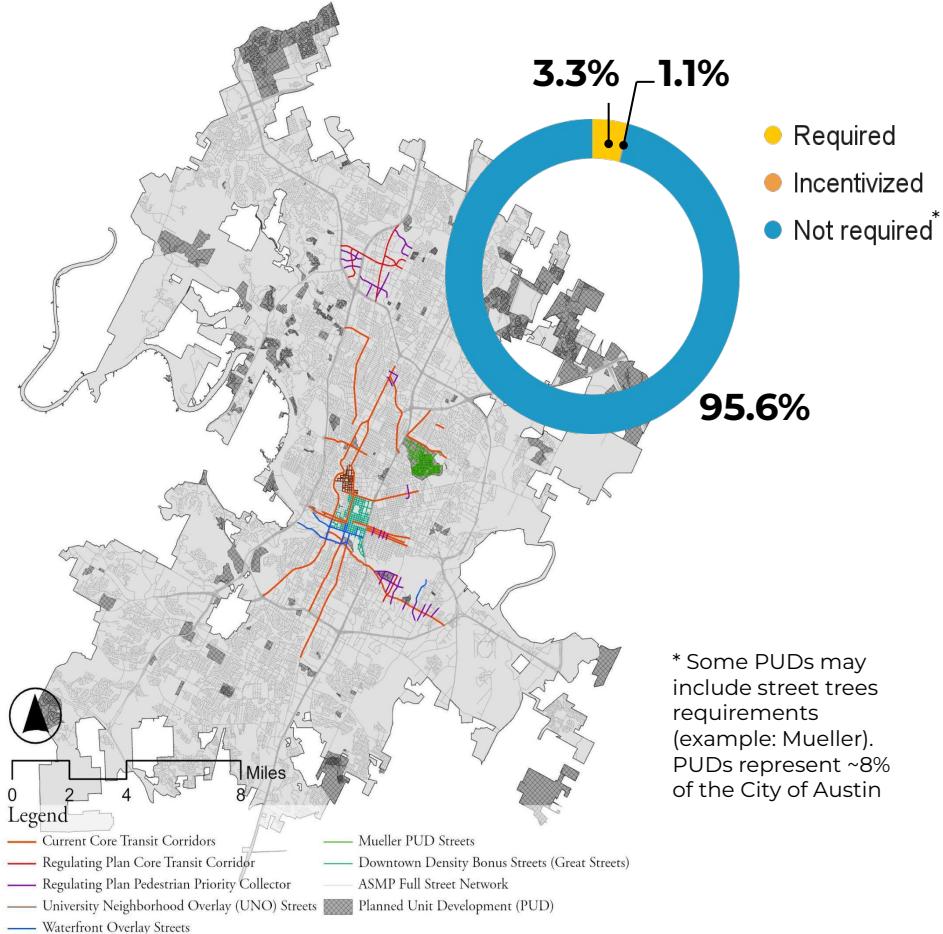
- The City's culture is change- and risk-averse:
- Utility reviewers often play the “public safety trump card”, vetoing street trees as they are “too risky”.
- Executive staff is often unwilling to make interpretations and/or provide guidance that would make it easier to plant ROW trees.
- The UCM represents utility department interests rather without consideration for impacts on city-wide goals and priorities



Agencies with interests in the ROW- Portland, OR

2. Regulations

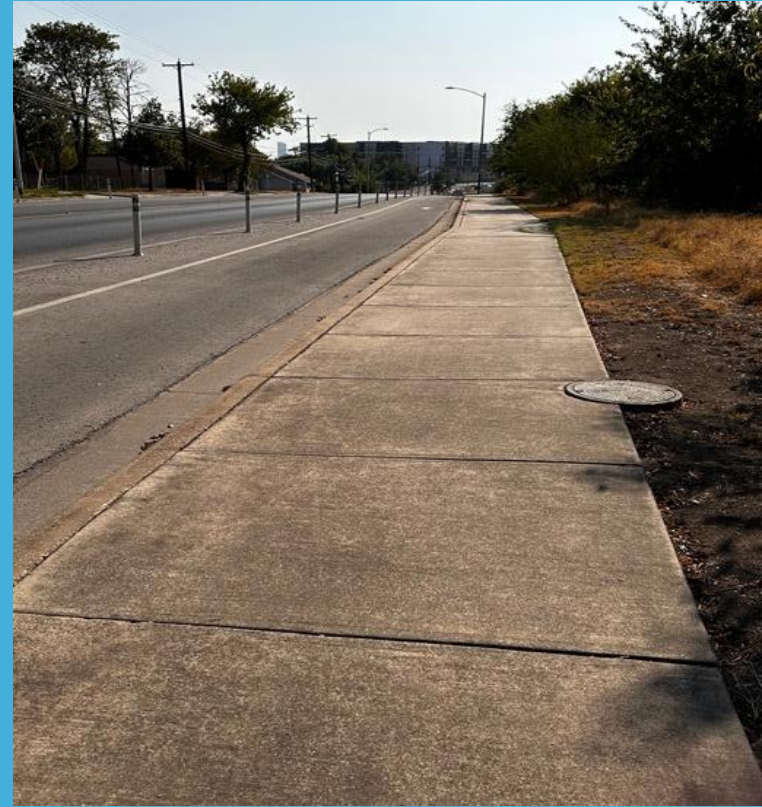
- Developments are ***only required*** to provide street trees ***on ~3% of the streets*** in Austin.
- Where street trees *are* required, it is ***easier to get relief that to comply*** (Through AEC and waivers).
- Existing TCM street tree ***requirements are not enforced*** (required on level 2 and up)



Map showing the streets that require developers to provide street trees, per Subchapter E

2. Regulations: *Public Projects*

- Public street projects are ***not required to include street trees***
- Public project that go through the streamlined “***general permit*** process” are ***not allowed to include street trees***
- Many public street projects ***preclude street trees from being planted in the future***
- Bond-funded transportation projects are not allowed to include funding for street trees in Texas



Manor Rd example of a GP “monolithic” sidewalk project with no trees and no ability to plant them in future where they’re most needed, against the curb.

3. Rules- *Criteria Manuals*

- Criteria Manual **rules protect departmental interests**, do not optimize limited ROWs, do not reflect how trees grow
- Some **rules conflict with City goals**, policies, and priorities, often superseding adopted regulations
- Minimum separation rules have been inflated from 5' to 9' - **triggering case-by-case departmental review** of most street trees
- Criteria manuals are vague- leave **too much room for staff interpretation and discretion**, reduce predictability of development review.

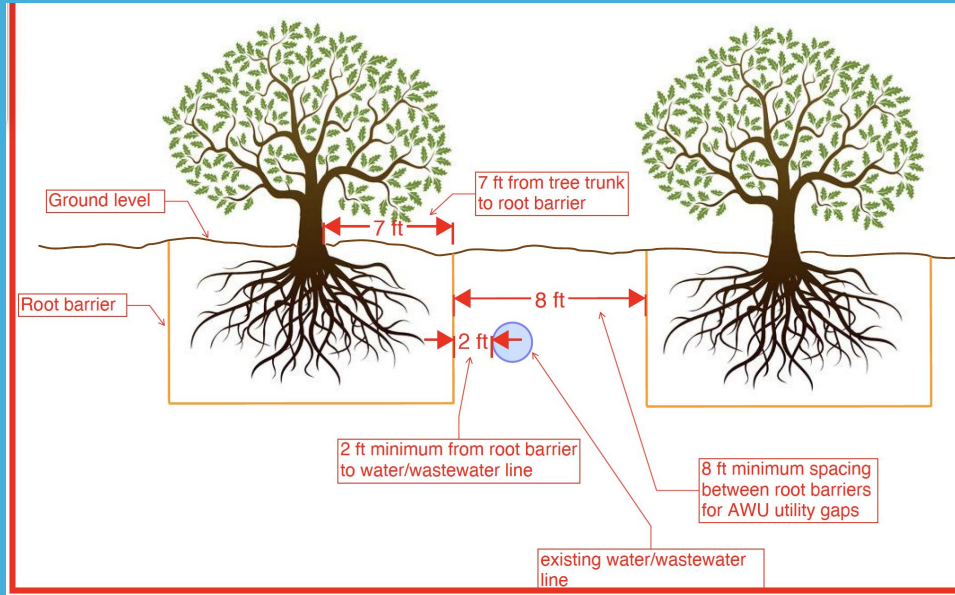


Illustration of current Utility Criteria Manual's distance separation and root barrier standard

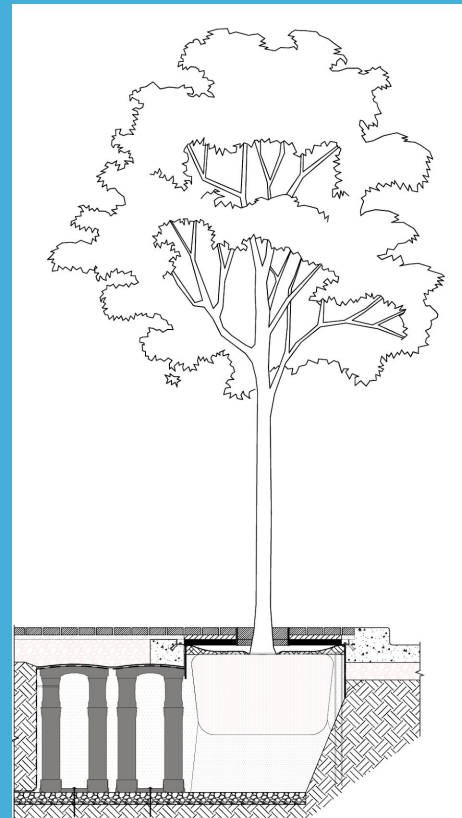
4. Permitting- *Long, Risky & Duplicative*

- License agreement process is **duplicative of site plan review**- (~40 site reviews by ~20 different ROW parties X 2)
- License Agreement reviewers often have different interpretations than site plan reviewers- ***jeopardizing and lengthening site plan approval, sometimes by up to 2 years.***
- Most development consultant teams pursue AEC or waivers to avoid the license agreement process



4. Permitting- *Purpose & Precedent*

- ***License agreement purpose:***
 - Privatize maintenance responsibility, otherwise on Public Works
 - License agreement buffers the City from liability for non-standard items in the public ROW
- In many other cities it is the abutting landowners' responsibility to maintain street trees
- ***Street trees must become “standard” elements in the public ROW***
- Standard details, specifications, and product lists- represent designs that are pre-approved by ROW stakeholders and eliminate the need for case-by-case review



This “special standard” tree planting detail is already in use in The Corridor Construction Program, that “suspends” pavement over root zone.

4. Cost

- Today, ***permitting*** street trees is very unpredictable, risky, and expensive
- ***Moving utilities*** away from street trees is expensive
- Street trees require ***irrigation and maintenance*** (especially for first 2-3 yrs)
- Some projects like affordable housing are particularly sensitive to cost increases



4. Cost- *Potential Funding*

- ***There are already COA funding sources that could be used for private and public projects for both tree-planting and maintenance costs:***
 - DSD's Tree Mitigation Funds
 - AE's Urban Heat Island Reduction funds (~\$1 million is available annually)
 - Great Streets Development Program funds from parking meter revenue
 - Payment-in-lieu fee for projects that cannot feasibly plant frontage trees
- ***CIP Funding:***
 - Project Connect, Congress Ave UDI, I35 Cap & Stitch, Corridor Construction Program, etc.
 - Future bonds could be approved for planting and maintaining trees, as well as for utility re-location, that could be orchestrated street-by-street, along with AE undergrounding projects.
- **Grants:** TreeFolks, Austin Parks Foundation, Texas Trees Foundation, etc.

GREEN STREETS INITIATIVE **STRATEGY**

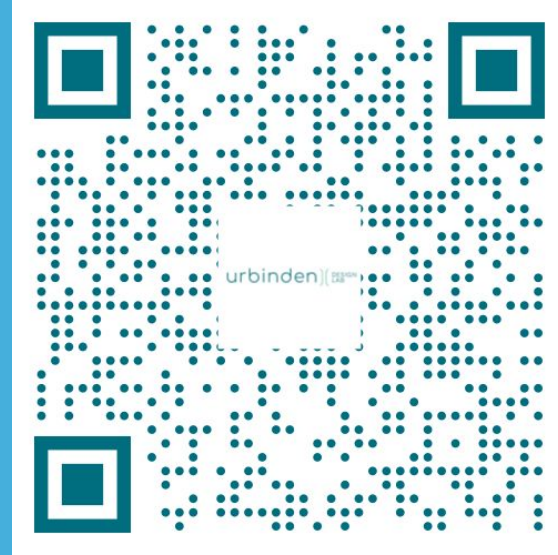
- ***Build a wide coalition*** of industry organizations and equity, environmental and mobility advocates
- ***Research and draft technical report*** on Barriers to Street Trees in Austin
- ***Collaborate with City Council offices*** to get the “Green Infrastructure Resolution” in front of Council
- ***Ongoing engagement post-resolution:***
 - TARP working group
 - Continued advocacy through City Council offices
 - Organize coalition around feedback to City Staff in Sept. when they return to Council

GREEN STREETS INITIATIVE

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **[Leadership]** Appoint a “Public Realm Officer”
2. **[Regulations]** Require street trees in public and private projects
3. Remove barriers to street trees in rules, regulations, and development review processes
 - a. **[Rules]** Reform Criteria Manuals
 - b. **[Standardization]** Adopt standard details & specifications
 - c. **[Process]** Eliminate the License Agreement requirement
4. **[Funding]** Subsidize street trees.

Thank you! Sign-up to support the Green Streets Initiative and receive the upcoming Urbinden report



Urbinden.com/green-streets-initiative

Kevin Howard kevin@urbinden.com

Jana McCann, FAIA janam@mccannadamsstudio.com