

2015 Urban Forest & Green Space City Council Candidate Questionnaire



Name: Brianna Thomas

District: District 1

1. Larger trees provide significantly more ecological value to Seattle's green infrastructure, by reducing storm water runoff, cleaning pollutants from the air, and providing animal habitat. Do you support giving greater protection to large trees like Heritage Trees and exceptional trees? What measures would you propose to provide this protection?

Yes. Preserving Seattle's exceptional trees is an absolutely fundamental component of responsible urban forest stewardship. As arbiters of Seattle's land-use code, City's Department of Planning and Development is primarily responsible for protecting our trees, with SDOT and Seattle City Light participating within their spheres of influence. Obviously, the DPD is the wrong department for this job, since its primary mission is to help developers build, not to mitigate the impacts of new development. Further, distributing responsibility for our urban forest across many City departments threatens trees by inhibiting comprehensive planning. I would prefer to see tree protection handled by the Office of Sustainability and the Environment. This is the natural home for the City Arborist, not in SDOT. Further, OSE staff should be an institutional part of the design review process for new development, to make sure that our environmental interests are protected as Seattle grows. We must revise our current, complaint-based system of tree protection as well. It doesn't matter what regulations govern tree removal if the City can only respond to violations after the fact. Heritage and exceptional trees are protected from removal by developers, unless retaining these trees prohibits developers from building up to their maximum floor area ratio. We should get rid of this exemption. If the Mayor and City Council want to increase density in single-family zones, where most of our old, large trees are, then we need to make sure that new residential units accommodate our urban forest and retain these trees.

2. Seattle's interim tree ordinance protects existing groves of trees (group of 8 or more trees 12" in diameter). The Department of Planning and Development has proposed removing this protection. Do you support continuing the policy of protecting tree groves to conserve habitat and canopy cover?

Yes. The Department of Planning and Development has a conflict of interest when it comes to conserving habitat and our tree canopy. We must retain this policy, actively enforce it and, going forward, ensure that the DPD is monitored and audited for its performance on these issues. As mentioned above, I believe the Office of Sustainability

and the Environment is the proper administrative home for tree protection and associated matters of urban forest stewardship.

3. Deferred maintenance results in the costly loss and replacement of trees and landscapes. Do you support funding for the maintenance of public greenspaces, including increased funding for the Green Seattle Partnership so that the goals to restore our parklands, greenbelts, and critical areas can be met?

Yes. The Green Seattle Partnership has done really incredible and important work preserving and maintaining our green spaces. I support increased, dedicated and stable funding for it.

4. Seattle currently has a 23 percent tree canopy cover. Seattle's Urban Forest Stewardship Plan targets a 30 percent canopy cover goal by 2037. To help reach this goal, do you support strengthening tree protection by requiring permits to remove trees on private property?

Yes. In the 1970's Seattle had closer to 40% tree canopy cover. Seattle is growing very quickly, and the City has done a poor job protecting our tree canopy as neighborhoods re-develop. We can expect an additional 120,000 and 115,000 new jobs over the next 20 years. That equates to significant, ongoing residential, commercial and transportation infrastructure development. Urban sprawl is environmentally insane and, in any case, prohibited by Washington State's Growth Management Act. So, we're going to get more dense. We can do this responsibly, but only if we strengthen our commitment to green, open spaces, wild places and to the natural components of the urban landscape. I respect private property, but private property rights are not absolute when it comes to threatened public goods.

5. Seattle is one of the very few urban environments that still boasts an extensive, diverse, and impactful urban fruit tree canopy. Over the last six years, over 80,000 pounds of fruit has been gleaned from public and private property, and donated into the emergency food system. Do you support funding to continue the maintenance of fruit trees on public land and gleaning of fruit from private property for food banks?

Yes. This form of urban agriculture is innovative and important. No Seattle resident should have lack access to affordable, healthy food options. No Seattle resident should be forced to choose between adequate nutrition and securing other basic necessities like clothing or shelter. This is pretty basic stuff; it's part of the foundation and justification of our social contract. It is up to use to determine how to produce and distribute primary goods. Currently, our system of food production and distribution is environmentally pernicious. It relies too heavily on the use of fossil fuels for transportation and impels us into our cars. It places unsustainable demands on our water supply. It rewards the use of toxic pesticides, increases industrial waste, and threatens habitat. To address the existential threat of climate change, and to protect the air, water, and biosphere, we need to encourage local and decentralized forms of food

production, organic farming and gardening, and diets that include much less meat. Currently, the way in which we produce, distribute and access food is socially and economically unjust. Market forces, not human need, determine the quality and availability of food. Relatively affluent neighborhoods benefit from Farmer's Markets, boutique grocers, and Farm to Table restaurants. Poorer neighborhoods, wherein our minority, immigrant and refugee populations disproportionately reside, are often food deserts. We must aggressively expand urban agriculture in poorer neighborhoods, help fund large, centrally-located community gardens. We must ensure that our pedestrian, bicycle and transit infrastructure facilitates rather than hinders access to affordable, healthy food. We must help provide the space and tools necessary to make preparing healthy meals easy and affordable. We must expand our outreach efforts to ensure that nutritional information, and City goods and services are available to all residents.

6. Seattle is one of the fastest growing cities in the United States. Over the last two years, there has been a 25 percent increase in apartment building, which often involves the destruction of single-family homes that provide open space and trees. In 2014, Seattle reports that it has 5,546 acres of designed parkland plus natural areas. The Trust for Public Lands 2014 report places Seattle's ranking among the 200 largest U.S. cities as 188th -- that's 12th from the bottom. What do you propose to stop this loss of open space, and to increase open space in the city?

Seattle is growing. That's not going to stop. Sprawl increases our reliance on fossil fuels and our carbon footprint while threatening agricultural lands, wilderness and habitat. We must continue channeling growth to our dense urban areas and ensure that urban centers and urban villages have access to the public transportation infrastructure they've been promised for 20 years. But every Seattle neighborhood is going to have to make some room for new neighbors. 65% of Seattle's land is zoned for single-family use, which constrains our ability to grow and to provide affordable housing for working families. While I oppose rezoning single-family neighborhoods, these neighborhoods have to find a way to get a little denser. We must, however, do this carefully and responsibly. I believe we should provide public incentives for homeowners to create rentable units like in-law apartments and backyard cottages on their property. I believe that we should allow duplexes, triplexes and courtyard housing in single-family zones, but retain neighborhood restrictions on height and ensure that new development fits in with the character of the community. I believe that developers should pay impact fees into a City trust to fund the parks and open spaces that all residents deserve. And, as mentioned above, I believe that in exchange for allowing some increased density in single-family zones, we must strengthen and actively enforce protections for existing trees, green belts and other parts of the natural landscape. Developers should not be afforded the right to build up the maximum area if that means that existing heritage and exceptional trees will be removed.

7. The Seattle 2035 Comprehensive Plan calls for the addition of 1400 acres of open space by 2035 to accommodate population growth. What is your opinion of

this goal? What ideas do you have to achieve this goal? Do you support this goal and saving current surplus city properties to help meet this goal?

Seattle has an aspirational goal, made explicit by the Parks Department, of having about one acre of parks land for every 100 people. We're about 300 acres shy of that right now. With 120,000 new residents predicted over the next 20 years, it's hard to imagine that we'll succeed in acquiring 1,400 acres of new open space over the same interval. But it's very important that we try. First, have to preserve all existing parks land. We have to make it easier to convert surplus City land, like old City Light facilities, into green public spaces rather than continuing to sell this land off to private developers. We have to utilize development impact fees to fund additional open spaces. We have to expand our notion of a public-benefit, to ensure that we can get additional open space or other amenities in exchange for providing developers with street or alley vacations. We have to revise our Major Institutions Master Plan process, so that when universities, hospitals or other large organizations seek to develop or expand their campuses, they also expand the amount of green space available to the public.

8. Currently, the Department of Planning and Development is responsible for drafting the urban forest ordinance. Do you support the Mayor and City Council appointing a citizens committee to prepare a draft urban forest ordinance instead, such as the Parks Legacy Committee and Parks and Green Spaces Citizens' Advisory Committee?

Yes. Seattle residents and local environmental experts should take the lead on drafting our plans for our urban forest. The Department of Planning and Development should have nothing to do with this process.

9. The Department of Planning and Development is proposing to reduce the current long-term tree canopy aspirational goal in the Seattle Comprehensive Plan from 40 percent to 30 percent. Do you support maintaining the 40 percent long-term goal in the Seattle 2035 Comprehensive Plan?

Yes. 40% only gets us back to where we were in the 1970's. We should be aiming higher and doing a better job of distributing the tree canopy around Seattle's neighborhoods.

10. Trees and open space offer a number of community benefits: increased housing values; decreased rates of crime; offering protection against climate change; filtering stormwater run-off; and quality of life for communities. Share with us your favorite tree or memory of an open space and why you support continued investment in these community resources.

People aren't meant to live in unrelentingly developed, urban space. Without a close, physical connection to the natural world, the spaces we inhabit become oppressive and anxiety-inducing. I grew up in rural Georgia. We were poor, but I was a free-range child, a tree-climber and explorer. I want the same thing for my kids. I want them to be

able to run around West Seattle and South Park and discover the joy and wonder of old trees and unclaimed green spaces. We are the inheritors of a wonderful parks legacy, and we live in an area of unmatched natural beauty. It's simply essential to living well and flourishing.

Please add any clarifications or comments you would like to convey to us regarding the questions above, or on protecting trees and the urban forest and open space in general.

Are you willing to meet briefly with representatives from TreePAC, at a time and place that is mutually convenient?

Of course. It would be my pleasure.

Thank you for your participation!
Please return questionnaire by July 15 to treepac@comcast.net.