

2015 Urban Forest & Green Space City Council Candidate Questionnaire



Name: Karl Wirsing

District: 1 (West Seattle & South Park)

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?**

I definitely do. I support requiring city notification and review before any mature trees are removed from a property, whether for commercial or private construction. That said, I also know the surest way to get neighbors at each other's throats—or in a blood feud with the city—is to be too rigid in the application of such guidelines. We have to be pragmatic and understand that can't save every tree, but we *can* make sure of two things: first, we keep as many of our heritage and exceptional trees as we can, and second, with every removal, we need to make sure we are matching it one for one (or two for one) with a new planting.

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, keep the ordinance! I work for the School of Environmental and Forest Sciences at the University of Washington. Some of our core programs focus on sustainable forestry and forest ecology, and the immense social and ecological benefits we derive from trees (not that you need me to tell you any of this). The point is that even a small grove can have a huge impact, so it's vital we prioritize these mini forest pockets.

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?

Absolutely.

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, I do! To me, every big tree we cut down is heartbreaking, but property owners often have real and important reasons for removing a tree. So we need to be respectful of their interests, as well, and make sure the process of acquiring a permit doesn't become too onerous, opaque or inflexible.

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! So smart, so creative, such a great idea.

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?**

One of my central campaign platforms is the need to aggressively preserve parks and green spaces and undeveloped land. The latter, in particular, disappears just about anytime we blink, yet as Seattle grows, those empty plots will grow increasingly precious. I would support setting aside as many of those plots as possible—either through city ownership or through partnerships with residents and businesses—for long-term ecological protection. I would also support re-focusing new development on lots that have previously been built on—and are now either empty, abandoned or otherwise in need of major work. Don't surrender open space unless it is absolutely necessary; and even then, try to find another way!

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?**

Yes! I enthusiastically support the city hanging onto surplus property, and I'm very uncomfortable with the city selling land as a revenue stream (which feels immensely shortsighted). Not everything we set aside has to end up as a fully formed park with major maintenance requirements. Natural areas come in all types and sizes, and the first step is simply making sure we don't give up the unused ground we still have. Doing

something as simple as planting a few trees on a lot can help us make sure we have large, healthy, mature trees for future Seattleites to enjoy.

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?**

That sounds like a good move, especially since the first priority should be preserving Seattle's urban forest, and then working development projects and goals around those baseline urban forest values—not the other way around.

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!!

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.**

When I first flew into Seattle years ago, I felt like I was landing in a foreign country. The city exudes an overwhelming freshness, and so much of that springs from our deep forests and evergreen canopy. My oldest brother Aaron, who is a professor of wildlife ecology at UW, took me on my first hikes in the Pacific Northwest on those visits. Hiking with Aaron is like having your own pocket naturalist, as he gushes about all sorts of forest and wildlife facts along the way, like how to identify our native species by their bark (including Western red cedar, Douglas-fir and hemlocks). He was especially giddy when he showed me the old-growth forests around Mount Rainier. You simply have to be awed by these ancient giants, knowing all they've lived through and all they provide for the ecosystem. I was hooked, and I still get excited at the sight of even a single Douglas-fir rising from a neighborhood. So I will do everything I can to keep our canopy flourishing and protected—and to keep growing the next generation of trees to enchant future generations of Seattleites.

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.

This is one of my favorite subjects, and one of my most passionate campaign issues. Having lived in many other cities, from Chicago to Boston to Atlanta to Washington,

D.C., I know exactly how special our environment is in Seattle—and how central our trees are to the experience of life in the Pacific Northwest.

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

Absolutely!

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