

2015 Urban Forest & Green Space City Council Candidate Questionnaire



Name: Kshama Sawant

District: 3

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?

Larger, older trees are not only important to protect in their own right, but they also play crucial environmental and social roles in our community. Our orientation during the era of climate change should include the re-integration of healthy environments into our cities. Although there is acknowledgement of the climate crisis among the majority of politicians, there is very little action. The question before us is whether our city will continue to be run in the interest of big business and short-term profits, or whether we can instead take the lead on climate and the environment.

If, however, developers continue to have free-reign in Seattle, the current trends will continue. Everything from the building materials to the consideration of any important trees on a property will be decided by what will maximize the profits of big business. That is why Shell is currently using Seattle as a home base to drill in the arctic, in spite of mass public opposition.

The current protections of the large trees left in Seattle must be maintained and expanded. I support the introduction of a Tree Canopy Ordinance like the one in place in Lake Forest Park.

Through taxing big for-profit developers and using the maximum city resources, the city can build green affordable housing that can be developed in such a way that large trees are preserved and canopy expanded. To prevent further loss we also need to oppose the developer lobbyist agenda which says that in order to increase density, we must allow them a free hand with the natural resources we have left.

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?

Absolutely. I support preserving and expanding the groves that we have been able to protect in Seattle. We must also increase tree canopy. This hot year reminded everyone of the crucial importance of trees in our city. We need to reverse the trend of tree destruction.

Canopy cover serves as an urban carbon sink for greenhouse gases and lowers temperatures in the summer by 6-8 degrees. It encourages walking and community engagement by making streets more welcoming for pedestrian use, play, shopping, talking, jogging, and socializing with neighbors.

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?

When the federal government came to a stand-still in 2013, the national parks suffered greatly. In our time of budget cuts to fuel corporate tax handouts, public resources have been gutted. We have a decaying infrastructure, schools so poorly funded it is in violation of our state's constitution, and parks and greenspaces are neglected. These spaces have been shown to be critical for mental and social health in multiple ways (<http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/03/how-nature-resets-our-minds-and-bodies/274455/>). In practice, these cuts to park maintenance disproportionately hurt the working people of Seattle. In addition to public health, greenspaces help with air and water quality. The cuts and neglect are mostly in lower income neighborhoods where the communities depend especially on publicly managed greenspaces. These cuts are a social justice issue and need to be reversed. We need full funding for our public greenspaces including important programs like the Green Seattle Partnership.

Maintenance for parks can also provide many good paying jobs in a time when we have rising inequality. That's why, by joining with residents and activists last fall, I sponsored an amendment to the budget to fast-track city employees to \$15/hour. Many of the employees who were being paid less than \$15/hour by the city worked in the Parks department. The maintenance of our parks and greenspaces is an important service that should come with living wages.

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 believe that there must be bold measures taken to ensure that we can reach and exceed our goal for canopy cover. There are many ways that this can be achieved. I would like to see regulations that deter unnecessary tree-cutting and incentivize private owners to plant more trees to contribute to the cover. What I would not support is a permit-process that is expensive for working class people but would allow big property management companies to simply pay a little more to cut down their trees on a whim, while individual homeowners face costly obstacles to remove precarious trees that pose a danger to themselves or others. We must meet and exceed these important goals of canopy cover and re-planting, but must be crafted in such a way not to contribute to the rising inequality that is blighting Seattle.

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?

I am strongly in favor of promoting and expanding urban edible landscape in Seattle. The emergency food system is a lifeline for many in Seattle. We need to be investing in every measure like this which can help alleviate poverty and homelessness, while simultaneously taking bold steps to provide food and shelter for all in Seattle.

Imagine what would be possible if we pursued an urban fruit tree canopy as a city-wide public works project. We could dwarf the current 80,000 lbs of fruit, and set an example for what a 21st century city should look like. This would require a progressive tax structure, and first and foremost the political will to tax the rich and big business. That's why I take no corporate cash and accept campaign donations only from ordinary people and progressive community organizations.

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?

To reverse the loss of open space from increased density, we need preservation and a major expansion of public park space. We also need strong regulations to protect and expand open space and tree canopy for new construction projects. Tree Canopy ordinances like the one in place in Lake Forest Park can play an important role in

reversing this trend in loss of tree cover and ensuring new projects include trees and open space for them. A major expansion of public parks will require the political will to fight to tax the rich and big business. I will continue to advocate for a millionaire's tax, a corporate head tax, a commercial parking tax, and every other available avenue to address our regressive tax system and underfunding of public services.

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?

Absolutely. At the same time, while meeting the goal of a major increase in public park space, we also need a major increase in affordable housing. I support a major expansion of public parks including using surplus city properties, but some city properties must also be used for affordable, high-quality, city-owned housing.

In order to meet our goals, we must act intentionally as our city continues to be re-shaped. Now more than ever we must have public access to the resources needed to take up the opportunities that are in front of us as a city. To do this we must overcome our backwards tax system where the working poor pay the highest tax rates and the millionaires pay the least, so that we can expand open space through new public parks. This is one of the principal tasks in front of us as a city, and the movement for a \$15 an hour minimum wage shows the power that working and middle-class people have to make change happen quickly when we take action together.

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?

I support the creation of a citizens' committee for this purpose. However, such a committee must be based on ordinary working and middle class people, of renters and homeowners, not made up of developers and business interests.

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?

I support the goal of 40% tree canopy coverage. The effects of climate change are being felt more and more, and will have many disastrous effects. This year, we have faced record heat. Without adequate coverage, those who commute by public transit,

foot or biking are disproportionately affected and many will turn toward air-conditioned driving instead. This worsens air quality instead of improving it as tree coverage would. This is the opposite of what is needed, and shows the downward spiral we could face. There will be many more negative effects, both social and environmental, if we do not make bold progress toward increasing tree canopy. A booming city like Seattle with a population committed to environmental stewardship should be leading the country by setting strong goals and exceeding them.

Low tree coverage affects us all with a “city desert” effect and a lack of the other benefits more tree cover gives. It also disproportionately affects lower income residents, and more working class areas of the city currently have far less tree cover. In order to make Seattle hospitable for everyone, we must be stepping up instead of backing down. To achieve these goals, however, will require a progressive tax structure to replace this upside down one we’re stuck with where those with the least pay the most.

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.

Washington Park Arboretum is my favorite place in Seattle. I have many fond memories there, including it being the location where my fiancée proposed to me.

But a major expansion of public parks and open spaces like the Arboretum, is about more than just personal memories and connections. It is absolutely vital to the health of our community and quality of life. Seattle is full of people who love public parks, nature and open spaces. Our city policies should reflect that love and desire for environmental stewardship, not the agenda of mega-profits for private developers.

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.

There is much that needs to be done in order to make Seattle an environmentally healthy city with the urban forests and open spaces we need. Like so many other issues, we are prevented from acting on the boldest measures by a state tax system that has been labeled the most regressive of any state in the country by the ITEP “Who Pays?” report (<http://www.itep.org/whopays/>). In my one and a half years in office, I have tried at every turn to make funding more progressive so that we can boldly expand public parks and other essential public services. Our public funds are drying up at the same time that the number of millionaires in Seattle is going up dramatically. If we are to take the bold actions that the crisis of climate change demands, we need to raise

revenue. The agenda of the big developers and super rich must be replaced with one that demands we fund the public services that we desperately need. If we are to rise to the tasks in front of us, it will mean taking on this crucial battle.

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.***