

2015 Urban Forest & Green Space City Council Candidate Questionnaire



Name: Mike O'Brien

District: 6

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?** *Heritage and exceptional trees are parts of what make Seattle so special and we should have strong policies in place to foster an environment where property owners are stewards of the trees and see them as assets for themselves and the entire community. I am concerned about policies that create an adversarial relationship between property owners and their trees. For instance, if property owners see the regulations as overly burdensome, we may find that they choose not to plant new trees that may become tomorrow's Heritage or exceptional trees. Or we may have property owners feeling in is in their best interest to undermine a tree's health to turn it into a hazardous tree. While I recognize that our current regulations don't always protect trees that many of us would like to protect, I generally think they provide a good balance that supports stewardship of our trees. I am always open to new recommendations for regulations, but am also concerned about unintended consequences of such action.*

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?** *I support regulations protecting groves. I have not heard from DPD that they would like to remove it and I would want to understand the policy reasons for and against making such a change.*

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? *I fully support funding the Green Seattle Partnership. I personally fought for adding full funding (about \$1 million per year) in the recently passed Parks District and will fight to ensure that funding is protected.*

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?** *Similar to question 1, I feel the best way to reach our tree canopy goal is to create a strong set of incentives that encourage private property owners to be stewards of existing trees and want to add new trees. The city and other public agencies also need to invest in protecting and increasing canopy on public land through investments such as the Green Seattle Partnership. While a smaller piece of the canopy, the city should also continue to encourage street trees, including in areas where we typically don't see them such as industrial zoned parts of the city.*

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 I do and have supported budget allocations to support fruit gleaning.*

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?** *I'd like to see the report. I have looked at TPL's 2015 Park Score which ranks Seattle 9th of the largest 75 cities. This ranking includes many factors well beyond trees, but I would like to better understand the criteria used in a study that ranked Seattle 188th before commenting. As far as apartments go, we are facing unprecedented growth and are struggling with how to accommodate it and this will be an ongoing struggle as we balance competing interests. That said, apartment buildings are one of the most space efficient ways to house our families. If we are thinking about the ecosystem beyond just the city's borders, by providing housing in apartments we can get multiple families onto a single parcel of land which means it is possible to protect more open space than if those same families chose to live in a less dense pattern. Of course, when we create density such as apartment buildings, we also need to ensure that the residents of that housing has nearby access to open space. We will continue needing to find new opportunities to create strategic new investments in open space as the city grows.*

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?** *This is an ambitious goal that would be more than a 20% increase in our park, but it is a goal that I support. It will require that we constantly look for opportunities, including city land. But this goal should not be just about quantity (acreage) – it should also be about quality and focused on meeting the needs of the people in the city and habitat appropriate for the city. Many*

surplus city parcels may be better suited for other uses a while we pursue the high quality parkland the city needs.

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 am open to this but would need to understand the pros and cons. I would prefer a collaborative process over an adversarial one.*

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?** *This would cause me some concern, but I would need to better understand the reasoning behind such a shift. I was not aware of this intention.*

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.** *So much of who I am today is shaped by the thousands of hours I spent in the woods as a kid and young adult – mostly in the Cascades, but throughout the region and the West. To this day, I still return to the woods when I need to get recharged. Unfortunately, it is often difficult to find the time to get to the Cascades, but we are blessed in Seattle to have amazing forests to visit in the city, and I have recently found great pleasure in trail runs in our city forests in Discovery Park, Seward Park, Golden Gardens, Carkeek Park and Lower Woodland.*

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?

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