

Response to 2022 Statement of Legislative Intent MO-001-A-002-2022: Regarding a Chief Arborist

Introduction

On behalf of the Mayor's Office, the Office of Sustainability and Environment (OSE) is responding to City Council Statement of Legislative Intent (SLI) [MO-001-A-002-2022](#) requesting "a report with recommendations for the creation of a "chief arborist" position that would promote the preservation of Seattle's tree canopy and provide independent oversight of the City's management of trees, with an initial focus on the preservation of exceptional trees."

If policymakers were to decide such a position is needed in the City, OSE would recommend the position be focused on strategic oversight of the City's urban forest, with an emphasis on City owned property. The position described below aims to fill that strategic role through performing tasks related to citywide strategic planning, technical expertise in tree work decisions, communications strategy, and partnership building.

Process

OSE staff provided an opportunity to all Urban Forestry (UF) Commissioners to participate in a small group that would inform the content of this SLI response. The small group met with OSE staff and leadership three times. OSE staff also discussed the response with the full Commission at two meetings. OSE staff also met several times with the Urban Forestry Core Team to discuss the UF needs of the city and to develop details for this SLI response.

Background

Seattle has urban forestry needs beyond what can be met with existing staff and resources. These needs have been discussed for several years. There are nine departments in the city that have responsibilities around the urban forest (see appendix A); these responsibilities include protection through regulation and policy, management through planting and caring for trees on public lands, and educating residents on the need for and care of trees. There are staff teams in these departments who carry out those responsibilities and participate in the city's urban forest coordination teams, as outlined in the Trees for Seattle charter (Interdepartmental Team, Core Team, Management Team.) There is a position with the Office of Sustainability and Environment, the Urban Forestry Policy Advisor, that facilitates and coordinates the work of these teams; acts as liaison to the Urban Forestry Commission; and manages specific projects. Given this position's myriad duties, they do not have the capacity to lead high-level Citywide planning, monitoring of urban forest activities or partner deeply with departments in specific departmental policy, funding, and implementation issues. There is not another position that works across City departments to ensure effective management of the urban forest. A graphic of the Citywide urban forest management structure is included in Figure 1 below.

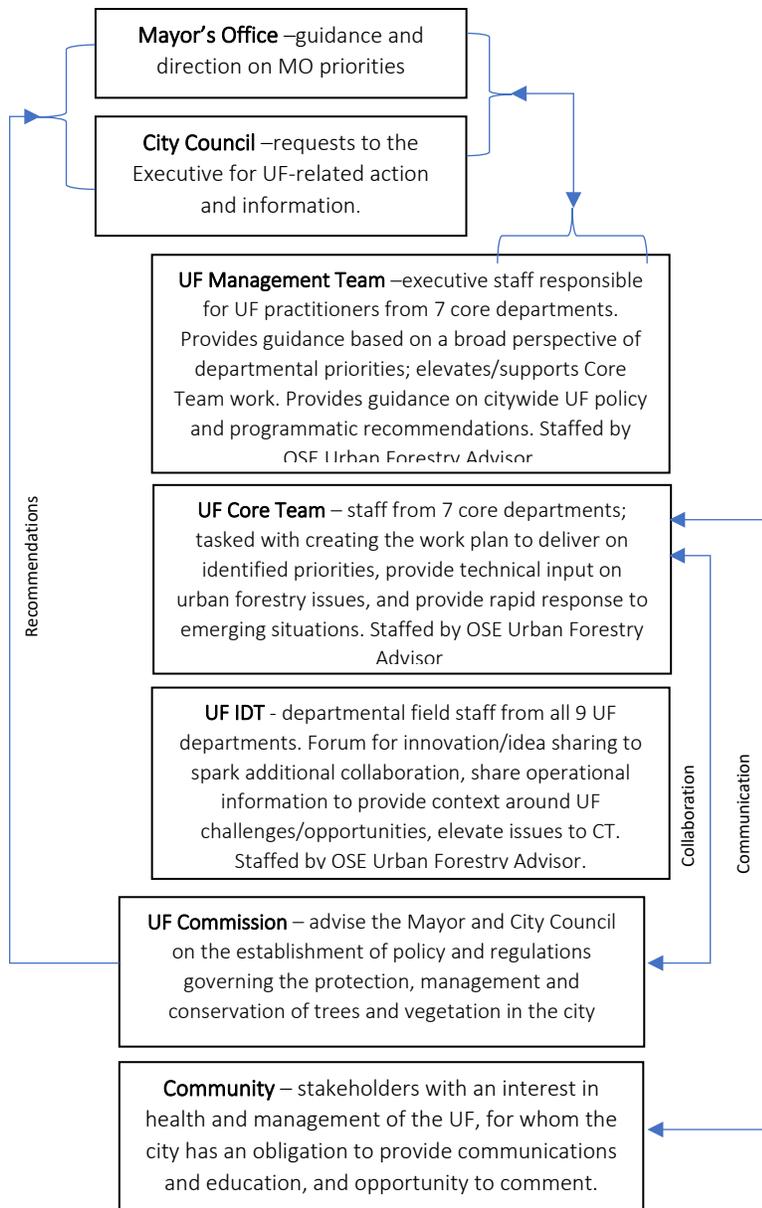


Figure 1. Current Interdepartmental Urban Forestry Structure

Position Description – “City Urban Forester”

All parties engaged in the development of this SLI response recommended the title of City Urban Forester rather than Chief Arborist for this position, to better reflect the proposed job responsibilities, which are broader than those of an arborist. Based on the City’s current urban forestry staffing and management structure and the preliminary results from the recent Canopy Cover Assessment report, the following section provides a position description for a City Urban Forester, as requested in the SLI.

Position details:

- **Position title, classification, department, and position within the department's organization chart**

Title: City Urban Forester

Classification: TBD, but possibly a Strategic Advisor II or III, HR would need to be consulted

Department: OSE, reporting to the Director or Healthy Communities Director; other departments are also possibilities but having position in OSE recognizes the multi-departmental aspect of this position.

- **Job responsibilities**

This position would work with executive leadership and staff across urban forestry departments to establish and/or affirm citywide and department-specific strategy intended to support a healthy and robust tree canopy and urban forest in Seattle; provide an on-going assessment on the efficacy of policies and programs in meeting these goals; and recommend changes as needed to decisionmakers. Specific position responsibilities could include:

Citywide strategic planning

- Engage with executive leadership across urban forestry departments to develop integrated plans for urban forestry, assessing budget and operational needs, identifying issues and recommendations, and reporting on Citywide progress.
- Identify policy and implementation issues and work across and with departments to lead or support development of policies, procedures, regulations, and ordinances.
- Research, apply for, and administer available grants to support Urban Forestry programs.
- Work with City Urban Forestry teams to develop and implement Citywide plans such as a Tree Canopy Equity and Resilience Plan, to guide the City in future tree planting and maintenance with an eye towards climate resilience and environmental justice.
- Lead the development of a Citywide urban forestry monitoring framework, including aligning tree inventories across land use types (e.g., street trees, park trees, other public trees, and trees on private property).
- Work with the city's Urban Forestry Core Team to conduct research, analyze data and compile special narratives and statistical reports. Monitor the health, diversity, and other trends of Seattle's urban forest, on both public and private property.
- Partner with subject-specific teams on urban forestry projects such as the development of a Pest Readiness Plan and exploration of career pathways in the urban forestry sector.
- Work closely with the City's Urban Forestry, Sustainability, Green New Deal, and Environmental Justice staff/work groups in implementing programs and policies that support the City's overall environmental and sustainability goals.

Technical expertise

- Support and potentially recommend adjustments to department decisions by conducting independent review of decisions to remove or heavily prune trees. Participate in landscape

inspections to determine identification and health analysis of trees on site and site restrictions that may impact tree plantings and removals.

- Provide technical expertise and assistance as necessary to City leadership and urban forestry managers regarding: urban forest risks and hazards; proper tree care practices; species selection, siting, installation and maintenance; insect and disease identification, treatment and prevention; and distribution and growth of the City's urban forest.

Communications strategy

- Develop and implement a citywide Urban Forestry communications strategy to share progress and drive action and engagement.
- Develop and present public outreach, technical information, and community participation programs; address public concerns and questions, and explain City programs, codes, and policies.

Partnership building

- Build partnerships and represent City interests in collaborative city and regional urban forestry and natural resource management efforts; work cooperatively with County, State and Federal Agencies on holistic management of urban forests for the benefit of regional communities.
- Work with the City's Urban Forestry Core Team to develop partnerships, which could include areas such as holistic partnerships with Seattle Public Schools related to urban forestry and natural spaces, and a coordinated interdepartmental restoration team to coordinate work across the city in management of natural areas and steep slopes to significantly enhance health and resilience of the urban forest for Seattle residents.
- Build partnerships with environmental justice communities to understand how best to preserve and increase tree canopy in low-canopy neighborhoods in alignment with climate and environmental justice priorities.
- Pursue Seattle engagement in relevant national and international efforts to highlight the importance of trees, such as Seattle's Tree City USA status and the Partners in Community Forestry annual conference through the Arbor Day Foundation.

- **Desired qualifications**

- Bachelor's degree in urban forestry, forestry, horticulture, environmental science, landscape architecture, public policy, urban planning, agriculture or related field and four years of experience in forestry, planning, arboriculture or landscape architecture relating to urban forest management and/or forest management, including managerial experience.
- OR any equivalent combination of training, education, and experience that provides the required skills and knowledge to perform the essential functions of the job.
- Certification as an arborist.
- Considerable knowledge of the principles and techniques of urban forest management and of the methods, materials, and equipment used in landscaping, plant and tree maintenance.

- Knowledge of or experience with: interpreting and applying local, state, and federal natural resource policies; local community issues and regional community resources available to citizens; and analyzing natural resource issues, evaluating alternatives, and developing recommendations.
- An understanding of the complexities of managing the urban forest and the multiple roles of government in doing so, including regulation, managing trees in an urban environment, community engagement, and program development and delivery.
- Experience seeking and securing grants and partnerships to continually expand scope and capabilities.
- Ability to create and share strategic communications and dialogue that reinforce the important connection between trees, nature, community, health, equity, and resilience.
- Experience serving as a key advisor and liaison to leadership on urban forestry issues.
- Experience evaluating options, developing recommendations, navigating political and policy processes to drive action and reach mutually agreeable solutions to challenging issues.
- Knowledge of and experience with city budget processes.
- Ability to develop, interpret, and communicate plans, policies, procedures, and objectives.
- Ability to read and interpret landscaping plans, specifications, and drawings and determine their compliance with codes, regulations and established standards.
- Ability to plan, organize, and present information effectively, both orally and in writing.
- Thorough knowledge of current arboricultural and horticultural practices including Puget Sound area trees and plants, plant material and physiology, and general horticultural principles of soil, fertilization and maintenance.
- Ability to conduct analytical, interpretive, and/or constructive thinking in varied situations.
- Ability to research horticultural/arboricultural/ecological problems, which may range from a particular plant concern to a problem city wide and develop solutions.
- Strong organizational and project management skills; ability to facilitate teams towards shared goals.
- Knowledge of the basic principles of land development and construction.
- Ability to author codes and ordinances relating to tree and horticultural issues.
- Ability to prepare and defend clear and concise written reports, recommendations, records, memoranda, etc.
- Ability to prepare and make an effective presentation to a variety of audiences.
- Ability to establish and maintain an effective working relationship with City employees within the Department and other City departments, outside agencies and the general public.
- Ability to work and communicate on a technical level with landscape architects, contractors, developers, and the general public.

Assessment of opportunities and challenges related to establishing the new position

- **Opportunities**

- If the Executive were to decide such a position is needed in the City, this position would add capacity to align a Citywide, strategic approach to urban forestry, and to further the goals of the Urban Forest Management Plan, the Climate Justice Agenda, the Green New Deal, and other Citywide policies and frameworks.
- Climate change has added new stresses to our existing trees and new complexities to our planting activities. A City forester could help bring focus, grounded in science, to the development of a resilience strategy for our urban forest that addresses climate threats at plant level, ecosystem level, and City level, and builds on the climate opportunity that tree planting and management provides.
- Developing a citywide strategy provides an opportunity for deep, intentional work with communities, particularly environmental justice communities, to understand how best to preserve and increase tree canopy in low-canopy neighborhoods in alignment with climate and environmental justice priorities.
- If the Executive were to decide such a position is needed in the City, further assessment of the interdepartmental coordination structure (see figure 1, above), and the roles and responsibilities of this position and the interdepartmental teams, would be warranted.

- **Challenges**

- Managing the urban forest is a complex undertaking. Departments who manage urban forestry crews (SDOT, SCL, SPR, SPU, Seattle Center) have different strategies for managing their trees based on funding, staffing, and shared uses of the land where trees stand. Working to create a citywide strategy will take deep, intentional partnership work with leadership and staff in each department to understand and work through challenges and opportunities specific to their operations and departmental context.
- In working to develop and refine citywide and department-specific strategy intended to support a healthy and robust tree canopy and urban forest for the city, the position would need to work with leadership across operations departments to affect development of plans and evaluate budget needs. The position would need a sufficient level of authority to be effective.
- Urban forestry staff across departments are stretched thin with existing operational work and advancement of the Urban Forest Management Plan. The position responsibilities described here represent a large body of work for the City Urban Forester and will require time and engagement from staff and leadership across urban forestry departments. The job responsibilities described here will require prioritization and sequencing to align with these constraints.

Appendix A. City of Seattle Urban Forestry Departments

		Department	Responsibilities
Inter-departmental Team	Core Team	Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI)	Regulatory: Development, permitting, and enforcement of regulations for trees on private property both during and outside of the development process, including tree protection, landscaping, environmentally critical area, and nuisance requirements.
		Office of Planning and Community Development (OPCD)	Policy: Stewards the City’s Comprehensive Plan, which includes broad policy direction for managing the urban forest.
		Office of Sustainability and Environment (OSE)	Policy: Leads policy development and coordination for citywide urban forest issues: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitation of the UF Core Team and the UF IDT • Staffing the Urban Forestry Commission • Coordination of interdepartmental issues; reporting progress • Updating the Urban Forest Management Plan • Staffing Green Seattle Partnership’s Executive Council and Management Team.
		Seattle City Light (SCL)	Operations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensures safe and reliable power delivery through comprehensive and environmentally responsible management of the trees and vegetation that their lines and infrastructure impact. • Maintains an Urban Tree Replacement Program that works closely with the City’s Trees for Seattle program and its Trees for Neighborhoods program. • Challenged by a prevalence of inappropriately sized trees that grow into utility lines.
		Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT)	Operations/Regulatory: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management of trees in the right-of-way (street trees), including design, installation, and stewardship of trees and landscapes associated with public right-of-way and permitting of actions that could impact these trees. • Maintains over 40,000 street trees and regulates planting and maintenance of another 200,000 street trees. • Must balance canopy cover goals with the need to minimize tree conflicts with surrounding infrastructure and transportation safety requirements.

Inter-departmental Team	Core Team	Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR)	<p>Operations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manages trees on almost 6,500 acres of developed parks, boulevards, natural areas, and other publicly-owned open spaces, including about 100,000 trees in developed parks and over 585,000 trees in the forested areas of parks. Must balance a wide range of recreational goals including the desire for picnics, sports, and play areas. <p>Community Engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Green Seattle Partnership engages residents in efforts to restore the city’s forested parklands; have been increasing their efforts to engage youth in job training and leadership development opportunities.
		Seattle Public Utilities (SPU)	<p>Operations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintains trees on the property it owns, and actively plants trees to meet drainage, capital project, and riparian habitat needs. <p>Community Engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports several programs that promote healthy urban forests including the City’s Trees for Seattle program, Green Seattle Partnership, and the Green Stormwater Infrastructure program.
		Trees for Seattle (T4S) T4S is the branding for citywide UF efforts; encompasses the coordinating structure as well as the communications umbrella. SPU houses the T4S team managing the work noted here.	<p>Community Engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The communications umbrella for all the City’s urban forestry efforts. Works to make the City’s urban forestry work accessible and relevant to the public, particularly residents. Builds partnerships and strategies to grow and care for the urban forest on private property. Works across departments to manage the Trees for Neighborhoods and Tree Ambassador projects, an interdepartmental urban forestry website, the City’s urban forestry Facebook page, and monthly newsletter.
		Seattle Center	<p>Operations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manages trees on its 74-acre campus, as it hosts hundreds of community events and three major festivals each year. <p>There is constant pressure on the trees and landscape from resident organizations, promoters, and city residents.</p>
	Finance and Administrative Services (FAS)	<p>Operations: Manages trees on properties and facilities owned or leased by the City.</p>	