City of Tacoma **City Council Action Memorandum**

TO: Elizabeth Pauli, City Manager
FROM: Infrastructure, Planning, and Sustainability Committee and Christina Caan, Policy Analyst
COPY: City Council and City Clerk
SUBJECT: Resolution – Directing the City Manager and Planning Commission to advance a phased set of actions aimed at creating a thriving urban forest in Tacoma by expanding the City's Urban Forestry Program and advancing implementation of the Urban Forestry Management Plan – May 13, 2025
DATE: May 6, 2025

SUMMARY AND PURPOSE

A resolution directing the City Manager and Planning Commission to advance a phased set of actions aimed at creating a thriving urban forest in Tacoma by expanding the City's Urban Forestry Program and advancing implementation of the Urban Forestry Management Plan.

COUNCIL SPONSORS

Council Member Kristina Walker, Council Member John Hines, Council Member Olgy Diaz, and Council Member Sandesh Sadalge

LEGISLATIVE INTENT

Background: Tacoma has historically lacked robust regulations regarding tree planting and preservation, resulting in low citywide tree canopy cover.[1] However, a thriving urban forest is a fundamental component of healthy, resilient, and livable communities.[2] Tree cover and urban landscaping play a major role in supporting urban wildlife, reducing stormwater runoff, filtering pollution, and reducing the urban heat island effect. Trees also contribute to the aesthetic environment, providing an attractive urban setting to enhance livability and foster economic development.

In the past several years, the City Council has begun enacting new regulations to better protect and enhance our urban forest, including revising landscaping and tree standards to support better environmental and community health outcomes during development, updating regulations for tree removal, pruning and planting in the right-of-way, and creating a heritage tree program.[3] In November 2024, the City Council also adopted an amendment to the Home in Tacoma Zoning and Standards Package, directing the Infrastructure, Planning, and Sustainability (IPS) Committee to initiate a broader policy discussion regarding the City's urban forest.

- On February 12, the IPS Committee received an informational briefing about the Urban Forest Management Plan and the current programs and services the City offers for urban forest management.[4] This presentation provided a baseline review of tree planting and maintenance programs, Urban Forestry staffing and funding, and other relevant information to help guide opportunities to adjust City regulations, financial incentives, and City responsibilities to help improve the tree canopy.

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[1] City of Tacoma - Tree Plotter Inventory
[2] City of Tacoma - Environmental Services Urban Forestry
[3] City of Tacoma - Urban Forest Manual; City of Tacoma - Heritage Tree Program
[4] City of Tacoma - Tacoma Urban Forestry Program Update

- On February 26, IPS Committee Chair Kristina Walker led a discussion on a set of new policy proposals for expanding the City's Urban Forestry Program and advancing implementation of the Urban Forestry Management Plan.[5] This included discussion of tree preservation standards citywide, appropriate City resources for tree planting and maintenance, and regulatory and non-regulatory tools for tree preservation. Following this discussion, IPS members agree to advance a resolution request to the full City Council for consideration.

Resolution: This resolution directs the City Manager and Planning Commission to advance a phased set of actions aimed at creating a thriving urban forest in Tacoma by expanding the City's Urban Forestry Program and advancing implementation of the Urban Forestry Management Plan.

Phase One: Public Engagement and External Consultation
Tentative Timeline: June 2025-December 2025

The intention of Phase One is to deepen the City's understanding of the public demand for expanding the City's Urban Forestry Program and advancing implementation of the Urban Forestry Management Plan. In addition, Phase One should begin work to identify contract services to work on data collection and analysis needed to advance more complicated City actions regarding land use and development regulations. Phase One should include the following directions to the City Manager:

1. Launch a series of Council-led public engagements and updates to gather community input on expanding the City's Urban Forestry Program and advancing implementation of the Urban Forestry Management Plan.

2. Provide funding options for expanding "Make a Splash" grant to include depaving and tree planting projects within an upcoming budget ordinance process. Sponsors recommend starting with a one-year pilot program in 2026 with a set total amount up to $150,000 to gauge community interest, as well as potential opportunities to allow corporate matching funds.

3. Use non-General Fund resources to initiate a contract with a consultant to support analysis, planning, and development of code and tasks in this phased approach as needed.

Phase Two: Budget Proposals
Tentative Timeline: January 2026 – June 2026

The intention of Phase Two is to prepare City Council to potentially advance a budget request that expands City tree maintenance in the right-of-way for the 2027-2028 biennial budget. Phase Two should include the following directions to the City Manager, considering the information collected in Phase One:

1. Create a fiscal impact note and legal analysis for Council consideration to create a program that offers business districts the option to pay the City to provide services to maintain trees within the business district. The fiscal impact note should outline three potential service level options that range in cost, as well as costs for staff and administration of the program.

[5] City of Tacoma - Tacoma Urban Forest Policy Discussion

2. Create a fiscal impact note and legal analysis for Council consideration of a range of options to raise funding for expanded City management of tree maintenance in right-of-way. Options could include a wastewater excise tax, stormwater utility rate enhancement, shared tree crew with other agency, or other recommendations. The analysis should also include information about the benefits to the City and community of expanded City tree maintenance in the right-of-way, as well as some suggestions based on Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) data for optimal locations to plant new trees in the right-of-way.

Phase Three: Code Development
Tentative Timeline: January 2026 – December 2026

The intention of Phase Three is to launch Planning Commission engagement on new land use and development regulations regarding tree canopy management and preservation. The Planning Commission's engagement is required by law when creating new land use and development regulations. Phase Three should include the following directions to the Planning Commission, taking into consideration the housing crisis and the vital need to meet our responsibilities to the Growth Management Act, as well as broader City budget constraints:

1. Study and make recommendations for ordinance options to be considered by the City Council around tree canopy management and preservation for development sites citywide. The Planning Commission should include consideration of the possibility of applying the established tree preservation and tree credits for development sites under Home in Tacoma to all additional zones beyond UR.

    - The Planning Commission should also consider the appropriate amount of time before a development permit is applied for and after a development project is completed for when these permit regulations apply.

2. Study and make recommendations for ordinance options to be considered by the City Council that create a new permit structure for a Canopy Loss Fee on sites without active development permit(s) in all zones.

    - The permit structure could offer exemptions for a tree(s) located on a site if it is a hazardous tree, nuisance tree, prohibited tree, tree damaging the sidewalk, significantly damaged tree, or a tree located within a View Sensitive District, as well as penalties for removing a tree without a permit. This work should also consider implications around equity and access in the City. Additional tree protection requirements could include tree size and zoning, as well as other potential data and analysis collected in Phase One.

3. Study and make recommendations for ordinance options to be considered by the City Council that increase tree canopy requirements for parking lots that are currently exempt (e.g. small parking lots) and also increase the tree canopy requirement for all parking lots.

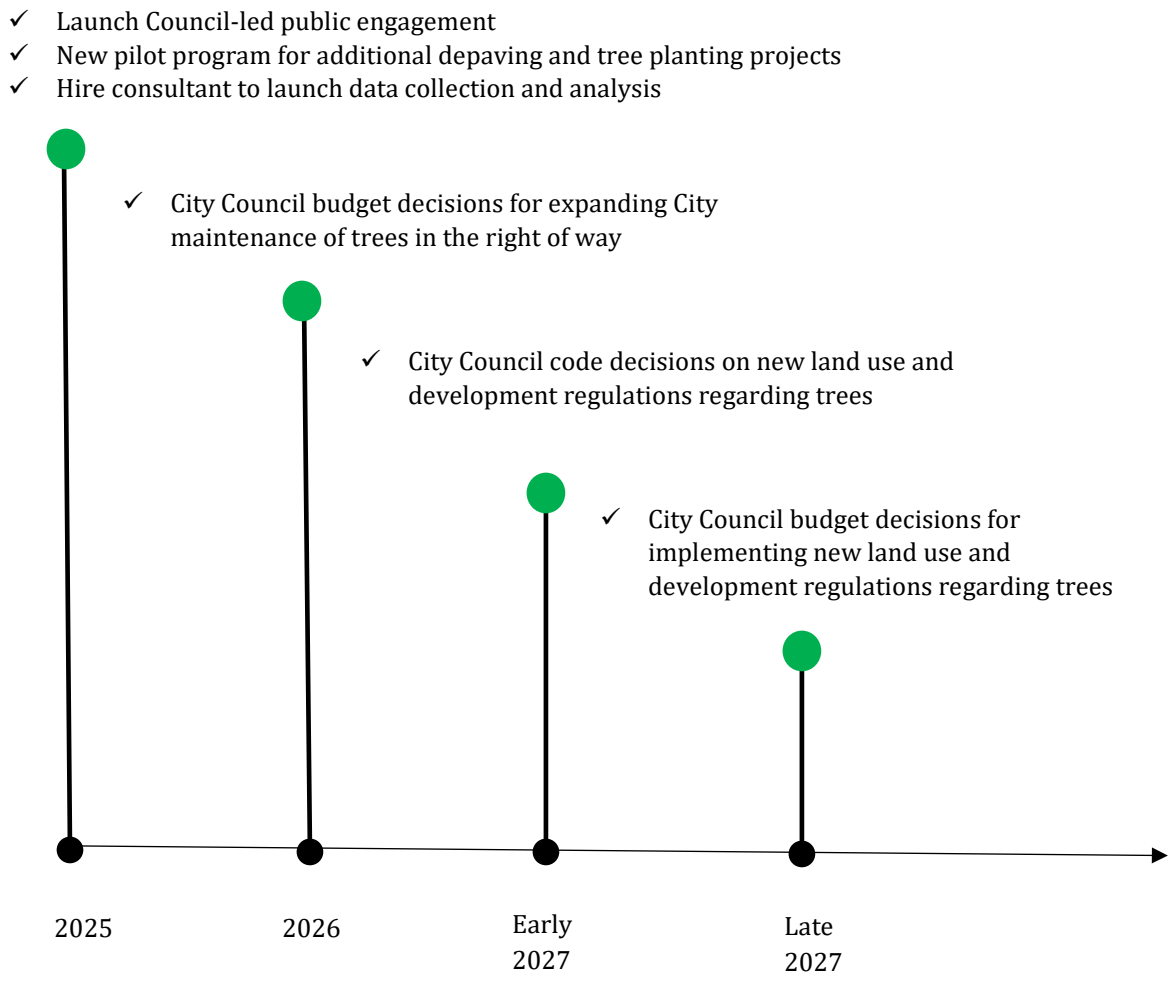
4. Study and make recommendations for ordinance options to be considered by the City Council that determine and require increased tree canopy requirements for commercial, manufacturing, and industrial uses in very low equity areas.

Phase Four: Budget Proposals
Tentative Timeline: January 2027 – June 2027

The intention of Phase Four is for the City Council to consider adopting potential new code developed through the Planning Commission process and advance potential budget requests for the mid-modification budget discussions for implementation. This consideration should carefully balance the vital need for additional housing development to address our housing crisis and broader City budget constraints, as well as enforcement funding and mechanisms. Phase Four should include the following directions to the City Manager:

1. Create fiscal impact notes for Council consideration regarding options for implementation of potential new land use and development regulations regarding tree preservation, tree credits, and canopy loss fees identified in Phase Three.

Graphic: Anticipated Outcomes of Phased Approach



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
Community members have raised concerns about Tacoma's tree canopy during various City Council and City staff engagements, including most recently during public discussion on Home in Tacoma. In addition, the City's Neighborhood Planning process for Proctor, McKinley, and South Tacoma all flagged community support for increased tree canopy as a priority. During the two-year public engagement process (2017-2019) to develop the City's Urban Forest Management Plan, community members also shared a robust concern for mature tree protection. Community members also engaged with the IPS Committee to share feedback and a strong desire for increasing Tacoma's efforts to maintain and plant more trees, especially in the right-of-way.

2025 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES
Equity and Accessibility: As of 2017, an analysis of LiDAR data showed that Tacoma's tree canopy is not distributed evenly across the city, with some census blocks in low opportunity areas experiencing as low as 3 percent tree canopy cover, while others in high opportunity areas have as great as 64 percent tree canopy cover.[6] This results in low opportunity areas experiencing greater urban heat island effects, as well as limited access to other social, environmental, and economic benefits provided by greater tree canopy. By protecting and expanding Tacoma's urban forest, the City can better ensure that all residents have the ability to reap the economic, health, and social benefits of green infrastructure and green space.[7]

Civic Engagement: Equity Index Score: Moderate Opportunity
Increase the percentage of residents who believe they are able to have a positive impact on the community and express trust in the public institutions in Tacoma.

Livability: Equity Index Score: Moderate Opportunity
Increase positive public perception of safety and overall quality of life.
How does your policy, program, or service help or harm the health of the natural environment?[2] (e.g. reduction in carbon emissions, open space conditions, sustainability, clean air, water and soil, and noise and light pollution).

ALTERNATIVES

Alternative	Positive Impacts	Negative Impacts
Do not provide direction to the City Manager.	The City Council could have the City Manager focus on other Council priorities.	The City Council would lack robust information about options for expanding tree maintenance in the right-of-way and other opportunities to further advance implementation of the Urban Forestry Management Plan.
Do not provide direction to the Planning Commission.	Tacoma would maintain current standards for tree preservation and tree canopy that exist in the Home in Tacoma package and	The City Council would not be able to enact new requirements for tree preservation or tree canopy on non-City property beyond current laws.

[6] City of Tacoma - Canopy Cover
[7] Tacoma Community Forestry

	the Planning Commission could focus on other priority work.	

EVALUATIONS AND FOLLOW UP
If approved, this resolution requests that the City Manager and Planning Commission report back to the City Council according to the tentative timeline outlined in the phased approach. Information and data gathered during these phases should also be used to help inform future work on setting realistic tree canopy goals and policies and be incorporated into the City's stormwater manual as needed.

SPONSOR RECOMMENDATION
Sponsors recommend approving the resolution.

FISCAL IMPACT
If approved, there are a variety of fiscal costs and benefits associated with this resolution:

- This resolution directs the City Manager to identify up to $150,000 of funding to expand the "Make a Splash" grant for increasing depaving and tree planting projects within an upcoming budget ordinance process. The funding sources have not been identified.

- While there are potential costs associated with actions outlined in this resolution, there are also gains and financial benefits related to increasing tree canopy and tree preservation. Urban trees can amplify the impact of City infrastructure investments by helping to remove air pollution, absorbing stormwater, and lowering urban temperatures. Urban trees also provide economic benefits to our residents by lowering air conditioning and heating costs, buffering excessive noise and wind, and reducing flood damage. In addition, urban trees are a form of public health infrastructure that can help reduce feelings of stress and depression, protect against skin cancer, and foster a sense of community.

What Funding is being used to support the expense?
N/A

Are the expenditures and revenues planned and budgeted in this biennium's current budget?
N/A

Are there financial costs or other impacts of not implementing the legislation?
NO

Will the legislation have an ongoing/recurring fiscal impact?
NO

Will the legislation change the City's FTE/personnel counts?
NO