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COPY: Infrastructure, Planning, and Sustainability Committee; Rebecca Boydston
PRESENTER: Michael Carey, Management Analyst, Environmental Services
SUBJECT: Urban Forest Management Plan and Municipal Code update
DATE: August 21, 2019

PRESENTATION TYPE:
Informational Briefing

SUMMARY:

Per the request of the Infrastructure, Planning, and Sustainability (IPS) Committee, City of Tacoma staff will present the progress to date on the Urban Forest Management Plan. In addition, during this informational briefing Staff will present recommendations for improving Tacoma Municipal Code (TMC) - with regard to urban forestry - in efforts to encourage long-term sustainability of the City's urban forest asset. Staff requests the Committee to provide feedback on recommended Municipal Code actions (if any) to explore in further detail prior to providing draft code for review.

BACKGROUND:

Across the Puget Sound, urban tree canopy is declining at a rapid rate (American Forests, 1998). When compared to other Puget Sound cities, the City of Tacoma has the lowest assessed tree canopy in the region. Recognizing the impacts of insufficient tree canopy, the City Council has adopted several policies to increase healthy tree canopy across Tacoma.

In 2010, the Council adopted the Urban Forest Policy (UFP) Element of the Comprehensive Plan, which identified a 30% tree canopy cover goal by the year 2030, "30 by 30". This UFP defines core focus areas including changes to regulations and standards to address tree retention, as well as leading by example through responsible planting, care and maintenance of trees on City-owned property.

In 2015, Tacoma's ten-year, citywide Strategic Plan and Vision (*Tacoma 2025*) was adopted. Several key community priorities were identified, including improving community health and the vitality of our Neighborhood Business Districts, and sustaining and improving Tacoma's Natural Environment. Studies show a direct correlation between improved human health and more vibrant and profitable business districts in areas with higher quality tree canopy.

In 2016, the Council adopted the City's Environmental Action Plan (EAP) with a focus on increasing healthy urban forest canopy. Specific EAP actions include improving regulations to encourage tree preservation and protection on private property and in the City right-of-way, as well as developing an urban forestry implementation strategy that identifies and prioritizes strategic and equitable planting locations, incentives, public engagement and education, retention strategies and maintenance.



In early 2019, the City solicited the development of the Urban Forest Management Plan (UFMP), subsequently awarding the contract to urban forest and green industry planning firms Plan-It Geo, LLC Peninsula Environmental Group and Conservation Technix (collectively the "Urban Forestry Team"). One component to this UFMP is the preparation of draft TMC updates with regard to urban forestry.

ISSUE:

In urban communities, the pressure of development and an increase in ecological stresses such as urban heat island, storms, drought and pests require proactive management in order to avoid significant loss of trees. Climate change and other environmental stresses pose a significant challenge to the City, and disproportionately affects vulnerable populations. A healthy and vibrant urban tree canopy increases the City's ecological resiliency, while also lowering the impacts of greenhouse gases, urban heat, air pollution and other environmental stressors on the community.

The City has adopted policies to increase healthy tree canopy cover, however, many of the proactive management strategies necessary to preserve and manage healthy trees, consistent with other communities, have not yet been explored or implemented.

The Urban Forestry Team has been investigating the City's urban forest operations, including its budget, policies and depth of TMC. Additionally, the Team has been collecting data and using previous studies such as the Tree Canopy Assessment to conduct analyses for a better understanding of existing conditions as it relates to trees in public areas and Citywide urban forest canopy cover. Utilizing this research, the Team is working towards two major goals: (1) benchmarking and analyzing other jurisdictions' municipal code related to the urban forest and (2) drafting achievable code revisions based on City of Tacoma policy direction.

Staff will present to the Committee recommended actions targeted at translating our adopted policy and urban forestry best management practices into tangible TMC updates to keep the public safe, our neighborhoods thriving, while also realizing the benefits of a healthy urban forest.

ALTERNATIVES:

This is an informational briefing. Staff will present to the Committee, feasible areas of focus for TMC updates and ask for direction from the Committee to further explore in a future Committee meeting.

FISCAL IMPACT:

This is an informational briefing. Fiscal impacts will not be explored at this time.

RECOMMENDATION:

This is an informational briefing. Staff will ask the Committee for recommendations on which TMC updates to explore at a future IPS meeting.