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PRESENTER: Michael Carey, Urban Forest Program Manager, Environmental Services
SUBJECT: Urban Forest Management Plan - Phase 1 Update
DATE: October 16, 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 (UFMP). The UFMP project team has concluded the first phase -Research and Baseline Analysis- of the two-phased project. This first phase establishes a baseline from which short- and long-term strategies can be developed and monitored over time (Phase 2). Staff requests the IPS Committee to provide feedback on the research and urban forest baseline, with the intent to incorporate the feedback into Phase 2 of the UFMP's development.

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 many policies specifically calling out the need for attention and resourcing to increase healthy tree canopy across Tacoma. A few of these policies include the 2008 Climate Action Plan, 2010 Urban Forest Policy Element (Comp Plan), and the 2016 Environmental Action Plan.

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"). The Urban Forestry Team started the development of the UFMP in April 2019, and intends to adopt the final UFMP through Council Ordinance in December 2019.

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 is developing the UFMP to address these concerns around urban forest management in Tacoma. The main tenants of this Plan are to ensure public safety, increase operational efficiencies, facilitate short- and long-term sustainable urban forest planning, validate budgets and programs, ensure equitable distribution of resources and services, and standardize methodology for asset management of the urban forest.

In order to achieve these goals, during Phase 1 of the UFMP extensive research and auditing processes were conducted to establish baseline conditions of Tacoma's urban forest. This deep dive has several main tenants that will be discussed at this presentation:

1. Existing Plan and Policy Review – To gauge the City's commitment and readiness for urban forest sustainability, existing policies and plans were reviewed.
2. City Staff Interviews - City department workflows and operations were evaluated to determine the existing infrastructure and processes around tree management, and to identify gaps and areas for improvement.
3. Urban Forest Benchmarking – Benchmarking research was conducted to determine Tacoma's investment in community tree management compared to other communities. This also helped us to understand the additional level of effort and capacity necessary to satisfy the City's adopted goals, and to ensure urban forest sustainability.
4. Data Analysis – A thorough data analysis was conducted to identify gaps in resourcing and coverage across the entire City geography. This also identified the current urban forest readiness, health, and resilience conditions.
5. Community Interests and Input – To inform the strategies for closing these gaps, extensive community outreach was conducted to gather public input and viewpoints relating to the urban forest. Multiple data sources were utilized, including public surveys, historic phone call logs and 311 data, and comments from public meetings and stakeholder presentations.

Utilizing all of this information from the research process, elements of urban forest sustainability, and management were audited using the comprehensive U.S. Forest Service system. Results of this audit identify the City's strengths and vulnerabilities relating to urban forest management. This Urban Forest Sustainability Audit will be the foundation of Phase 2 of the Plan, the short- and long-term strategies. It also provides the framework for adaptive management as changes to the City's environment and public perception change over time.

ALTERNATIVES:

This is an informational briefing. Staff will present to the Committee the findings of the Urban Forest Sustainability Audit, and start to detail potential recommended actions targeted at addressing vulnerabilities in sustainable forest management. Staff requests the IPS Committee to provide feedback, to focus the development of Phase 2 of the UFMP's development, which will be presented 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 direction on topics to explore for Phase 2 of the UFMP development.