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COPY: Infrastructure, Planning, and Sustainability Committee
PRESENTER: Ryan Hebert, Pat Babbitt, Office of Environmental Policy and Sustainability
SUBJECT: Urban Food Security through Trees and Urban Agriculture on Public Lands
DATE: September 9, 2020

PRESENTATION TYPE:

Informational Briefing

SUMMARY:

In direct response to community food security issues amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, and by the request of Council Member McCarthy, City of Tacoma staff will present to the Infrastructure, Planning, and Sustainability Committee (IPS) opportunities to leverage public lands, including rights-of-way (ROW) and publicly owned parcels, for increased urban food security. City staff will provide a brief overview of relevant programs, projects, Municipal Code, and administrative processes, directly relating to reducing barriers to urban agriculture and the use of food producing trees on these public lands. This will include an informational update about implementation of the Urban Farm Pilot Project as well as a request for IPS to support changing Municipal Code to reduce barriers the production of food in the public ROW.

BACKGROUND:

City Council has adopted numerous policies directly supporting improving community food security, through increasing local food access, supporting urban agriculture, and a localized food system. These policies include:

- Urban Forest Policy Element of the Comprehensive Plan (ORD27892, 2010)
- Tacoma 2025 Strategic Plan (RES 39016, 2015)
- Environmental Action Plan (RES39427, 2016)
- Memorandum of Understanding with Harvest Pierce County (No. SC104536, 2017)
- Urban Forest Management Plan (RES40492, 2019)

The COVID-19 crisis has strained supply chains and household budgets, creating food shortages and causing Tacoma community members to seek additional food assistance or go hungry, making these policies even more important today than when they were initially adopted. At the same time, Tacoma has a great deal of public land with potential for growing food, including approximately 240 acres of unimproved ROW and numerous underutilized publicly owned parcels. Further, during the two-year development of Tacoma's Urban Forest Management Plan (UFMP), the community continually stressed the importance of community trees providing numerous health benefits, including removing particulate pollution from the air, reducing the urban heat island, and as a source for nutritious food.

Food producing trees are currently prohibited in the ROW (TMC 9.19) and, although permitted on other public lands, there is no clear process for approvals to plant them. The 2019 UFMP specifically addresses the need to ease restrictions on appropriate food producing trees planted on suitable public lands in support of gleaning efforts.



Per the 2016 Environmental Action Plan (EAP) actions to pilot an agriculture project on public land (A7) and clear hurdles to selling local produce (A5), the City has contracted with Harvest Pierce County to implement a small-scale commercial agriculture pilot project on City-owned land to identify and clear barriers to growing and selling food in Tacoma.

ISSUE:

Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, many more of Tacoma's community members are suffering from reduced income, so a more significant portion of their remaining budget is spent on essentials like food. By May 2020, local food banks reported that food demand doubled or tripled and the number of people seeking food assistance increased by 40%, while State employees reported a doubling in the state residents seeking food assistance.^{1,2,3} In response to the need, many parts of the Tacoma community – including local governments, non-profits, and everyday community members – have organized various efforts to purchase, receive donations of, grow, rescue, trade, stockpile, and ultimately deliver more food to hungry community members.

In response to the emergency, Tacoma City Council allocated an additional \$90,000 on top of \$275,552 in prior funding in April 2020 to support local food banks and other emergency food programs. Staff noted then that there may be a need to provide additional resources through these food delivery strategies while increased food demand remains. The City has pursued other food security strategies, as well. At this time, City policies, programs, or resources support various private and community-based food growing models, including private and community gardens, raised beds in residential ROW, community orchards, and food forests. Based on recent community input (2016 EAP, 2018 Just and Healthy Food System Report, and 2019 UFMP), City staff have explored other food growing opportunities, including allowing the planting of food producing trees and supporting commercial agriculture on public lands. Staff will discuss these opportunities to diversify and increase food grown on public lands in Tacoma.

Tacoma has approximately 240 acres of unimproved ROW and numerous publicly owned parcels with potential for growing food. While our community struggles with food security, our region's urban tree canopy is also declining at a rapid rate. When compared to other Puget Sound cities, the City of Tacoma has the lowest assessed tree canopy in the region. Through various policies and public input processes, City Council and the Tacoma community have expressed support for increasing tree canopy coverage (2008 Climate Action Plan, 2010 Urban Forest Policy Element of the Comprehensive Plan, 2016 EAP, and 2019 UFMP). Food security has been a longstanding priority, and is now an emergency need since the onset of COVID-19. Reducing barriers to community food projects and individuals growing and selling food on underutilized public lands can support both increased food security and expanded tree canopy coverage.

Recently, the City of Tacoma contracted with Harvest Pierce County to pilot a commercial urban farm on City-owned land by the end of 2020. This Pilot is designed to identify and clear barriers to growing and selling food on public lands, as well as provide food to community members. Staff are working cross-departmentally to improve work processes and reduce or eliminate administrative barriers, including by seeking a variance on land use zoning (Title 13) and conditional use permit to pilot the farm at a small scale on a specific City-owned site. Municipal Code does not allow agricultural uses

¹ <https://medium.com/@livhicks00/food-insecurity-efforts-grow-following-covid-19-6bdb282db36>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/05/19/multimedia/coronavirus-food-banks-washington-state.html>

³ <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/homeless/from-peanut-butter-to-applesauce-washington-state-stockpiles-tons-of-food-for-the-need-ahead/>



on land less than 20,000 square feet in most zones. And, there is a lack of administrative processes to allow for agricultural uses on public lands.

In conflict with the City's goal to ease restrictions on food producing trees planted on public lands, food producing trees are currently prohibited in the ROW and there is no clear process for planting them on public lands (2019 UFMP). Allowing appropriate food producing trees in Tacoma's ROW expands opportunities for community members, particularly those without access to a yard, to grow and harvest their own food. Altogether, Tacoma community members will benefit from diverse and expanded opportunities to grow and sell food – making Tacoma's food supply more resilient against shocks as well as long-term challenges such as climate change.

Food producing trees were prohibited from the ROW 60 years ago over concerns of public safety due to fallen fruit and infrastructure conflicts. Improper planting practices can lead to fallen and rotted fruit, which is both a slip-and-fall hazard and a potential attractant of pests, as well as root systems lifting sidewalk panels. Rather than place a prohibition on all food producing trees in the ROW, there are proactive steps the City can take, such as establishing "Right Tree, Right Place" guidelines specific to food producing trees, ensuring only appropriate trees are planted, and that community members are aware of food producing tree resources from Harvest Pierce County, including fruit tree education courses and the Gleaning Program used for harvesting excess food.

ALTERNATIVES:

- 1) Make no changes to administrative processes or Municipal Code and continue to prohibit food producing trees on ROW land. The community will continue to not produce food on this portion of land, or continue to do so without permission.
- 2) Remove the restriction for food producing trees being planted in the ROW, and provide adequate standards, requirements, education, and connection to resources, so that people can do so safely and with reduced likelihood of public risk. These administrative process and Municipal Code changes support Tacoma in diversifying and expanding its local food sources, resulting in increased food security and expanded tree canopy coverage.
- 3) No alternative is being presented for the Urban Farm Pilot Project.

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no direct fiscal impact by moving forward with these recommendations.

RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommend the Infrastructure, Planning, and Sustainability Committee support administrative process and Municipal Code changes. Staff will then take proposed changes to the City Council to allow for appropriate food producing trees in the ROW. Staff have also begun developing a White Paper, which will include information and specific recommendations regarding urban agriculture and food producing trees in Tacoma. Also, staff will continue to pursue implementation of the Urban Farm Pilot Project. The intent of this pilot project is to identify further Code and administrative improvements to promote urban agriculture in Tacoma.