Urban Forest Priority Action Plan

Phase One: Community Engagement Report

Council Member Kristina Walker
January 2026

Introduction

In response to overwhelming community support for enhancing Tacoma's tree canopy, the City Council adopted the Urban Forest Priority Action Plan (Resolution 41682) in May 2025. The plan outlines a set of phased actions designed to develop new urban forest policy options and budget proposals for City Council consideration in the coming years.

Phase One of the Priority Action Plan included launching City Council-led outreach events to explore community perspectives on Tacoma's urban forest. To kick off these efforts, Council Member Kristina Walker launched a series of meetings with Neighborhood Councils, as well as several Committees, Boards, and Commissions. In addition, Council Member Walker held community walks that were open to the public in the Lincoln District and South Tacoma.

Between October and December 2025, around 150 community members shared feedback regarding the Urban Forest Priority Action Plan and the following community groups participated in an outreach event:

- The West End Neighborhood Council
- The New Tacoma Neighborhood Council
- The North End Neighborhood Council
- The Eastside Neighborhood Council
- The Central Neighborhood Council
- The South End Neighborhood Council
- The Northeast Neighborhood Council
- The Mayor's Youth Commission
- The Climate and Sustainability Commission

Report Contents

Section I. Key Themes Shared by Community Members

This section provides an overview of the community feedback that was shared on a set of four questions raised by Council Member Walker during the events, including:

- **Do you think that our urban forest, including trees on private property, provides public benefits?**
- **Who should be responsible for maintaining trees in the public right-of-way—the City or private residents? If the City were to consider expanding maintenance for trees in the right-of-way, it would require revenue to support the work. Is this a service you would support paying for?**
- **Should a property owner be allowed to remove any tree on private property for any reason? Or do you believe there should be specific restrictions on when tree removal can take place?**
- **To continue contributing to our tree canopy, should the City charge a fee to remove a tree on private property? Should we use that money to plant trees elsewhere in the City to replace the lost benefits?**

Sections II-III. Policy Considerations for Phase Two and Phase Three

Sections II and III of this report provide reflections on how community feedback might help inform the policy and budget work planned for Phase Two and Three of the Urban Forest Priority Action Plan. The identified considerations are not comprehensive but aim to consolidate key themes raised by the public.

I. Key Themes Shared by Community Members

In Tacoma, community members love their trees… Most community members believe that trees provide important public benefits, such as enhancing the livability of neighborhoods, improving public health outcomes, and helping to manage stormwater runoff and urban heat. Many community members also shared personal stories about beloved trees, especially large ones, that bring natural beauty and value to their neighborhoods. Some discussions drew comparisons between the urban forest and other forms of public infrastructure, such as roads and streetlights.

…and they are frustrated by the lack of an equitable tree canopy across the city... Many community members shared frustration regarding differences in the tree canopy across neighborhoods, especially in historically marginalized areas. They also noted that public benefits from trees are not equitably distributed.

…but many also recognize that trees are difficult and expensive to care for and can create safety hazards if not properly maintained. Community members stressed that caring for their trees can be difficult and costly, especially for older residents who have limited mobility and fixed finances. Some also stressed concerns about trees creating safety problems for neighborhoods. For example, several community members noted that fallen tree leaves clog their storm drains, increasing the risk of flooding. Some community members also noted that trees can become a safety hazard by uprooting sidewalks and can damage property when they fall or when their roots grow into pipes and building foundations.

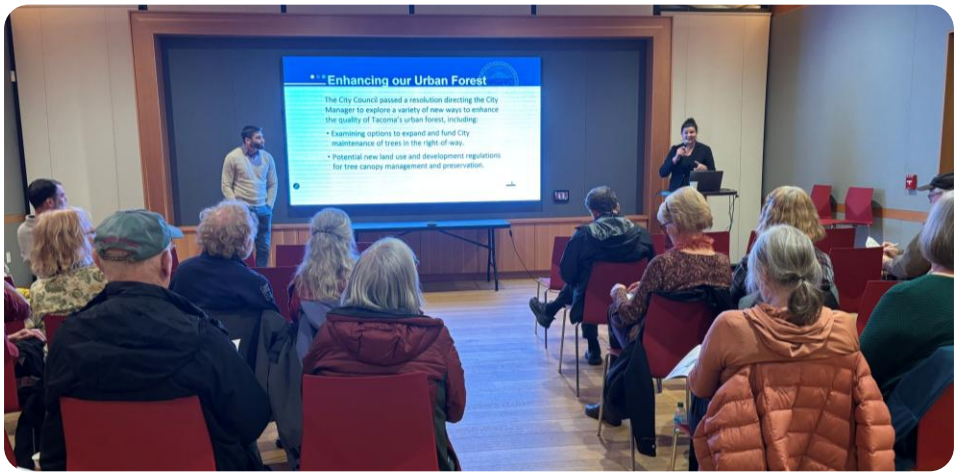
> *"It is a constant battle to take care of my trees, but I love them anyway."*

> *"Not all of our neighborhoods are benefiting from trees in the same way. It would be more equitable if the City provided care and maintenance for trees in the right-of-way"*

> *"Street trees are essential public infrastructure like roads, storm drains, and streetlights. It is the City's obligation to maintain all public infrastructure."*

Community members want the City to do more to enhance Tacoma's urban forest, but paying for new services is a challenge for many of them…
Community members expressed support for expanding City maintenance of trees in the public right-of-way, although most want the funding for expanded services to come from current revenue sources or existing utility fees. Many made frank statements about being unwilling to pay for expanded tree care and some expressed equity concerns about how the City would raise new revenue for expanding service.

…and they suggest that the City start with a more limited expansion of tree services to avoid surging costs. Some noted that expanding City care for trees along arterial roads would be more acceptable than residential streets, and that increasing the City's role in a limited number of areas could help to keep costs down.



Community members also want to explore more ways to increase community pride in Tacoma's urban forest and many are enthusiastic about volunteer work… Community members stressed that the City should expand its efforts to foster pride of ownership in trees, help people better understand their responsibilities regarding the care of trees, and launch volunteer community groups to help with pruning and watering in the right-of-way or for elderly residents. Community members also noted that developers should be required to maintain trees in the right-of-way for longer than three years.

…and want the City to explore creative ways to generate new revenue to help pay to maintain trees without just relying on raising costs for all residents.
Some community members shared support for a "Call to Haul" style service where the City would pick up wood waste for a fee. In addition, community members supported considering ideas for the City to gain revenue from collected wood waste.

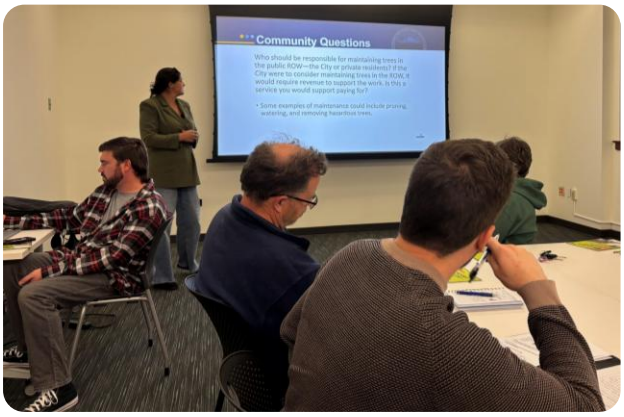
I don't want the City to start behaving like a Homeowners Association by creating rules for private property."

"Property owners should have the right to decide what they do with their trees."

"I couldn't imagine the City telling me I couldn't do something on my own private property."

Regulating trees on private property is a prickly issue that community members express strong and divergent opinions on. Many community members expressed shock and concern at the idea of potential new City regulations regarding tree removals on private property. Several shared concerns that tree regulations would open the door to additional private property regulations and expressed an unwillingness to explain to the City why they wanted to remove a tree. Some also raised challenges enforcing private property regulations, creating potential equity issues.

Many agree that public and private property owners should not remove healthy mature trees, including "heritage trees"… Community members largely agreed that healthy mature trees are vital for maintaining the City's tree canopy and provide important public benefits. Many supported creating incentives to preserve health mature trees or requiring fees to remove them from private property. Some believe regulations could help prevent property owners from making rash decisions on large tree removals that have a public impact.



…and do not want the City to create barriers that impede the removal of any hazardous trees. All community members agreed that the City should not create barriers to the timely removal of hazardous trees that pose a danger to lives or property. Some noted that fruit trees should also have no barriers to removal, especially for senior residents.

Community members are weary of the potential cost of tree removal permits… Most community members rebuffed the idea of requiring a permit fee for tree removals other than healthy mature trees and noted that it is already too expensive to remove a tree. Some noted tentative support for tailoring the cost of the permit to the age, health, and species of tree, as well as a reduced cost for lower income residents.

…but largely agree that a high permit cost for removing healthy mature trees would be appropriate. Many expressed support for a substantial fee to remove a healthy tree, especially if the tree is older than 10 years. Community members also shared support for requiring new trees to be planted after a removal, especially in low opportunity areas, and noted that the City could create a sign-up list for people who want trees planted in their area. Many also recommended providing discounted or free trees to plant.

Community members also prefer that the City offer financial incentives and expand assistance programs to help the public choose to keep and maintain their trees. Community member noted strong support for expanding financial assistance to repair sidewalks and property damage, including offering revolving loan funds. Community members also shared a desire for City arborists to provide more help to property owners so they can make informed choices. Some expressed support for allowing property owners to pay to offset the impact of a tree removal, especially if they are building affordable housing, while others noted that people should not be able to "buy their way out of maintaining trees."

"Human safety would have to take priority over a tree, but otherwise it should be a pretty high bar to take down a tree, especially a mature one."

"Given the nature of our current tree canopy, our highest priority must be protecting our mature trees, wherever they are located."

"Permit costs should be kept low because too many costs are rising right now and that the cost of living in Tacoma is already too high."

II. Policy Considerations for Phase Two

Phase Two of the Urban Forest Priority Action Plan (January 2026-June 2026): Phase Two includes the development and consideration of potential budget options for expanding City tree maintenance in the public right-of-way. The following points are derived from community feedback and may be helpful considerations in Phase Two:

- ✓ Efforts to draw on existing revenue to expand services would help avoid financial hardships for community members. New robust increases in public costs may be best served by a vote of the public.
- ✓ The public is more likely to support expanded City tree maintenance if this service aims to assist with the creation of an equitable and healthy citywide tree canopy.
- ✓ Pilot locations that can pay for expanded City tree maintenance services may be useful starting points for new actions.
- ✓ The public is likely to support opportunities for the City to gain new revenue from diverted wood waste, especially if the revenue helps expand tree maintenance services.
- ✓ Many are likely to embrace volunteer opportunities to help their neighbors with tree care, such as helping to clean fallen leaves for seniors. More public educational opportunities are also likely to be helpful.
- ✓ Expanding City support for sidewalk repairs, property repairs, and leaf cleanups is likely to help motivate community members to preserve and care for their own trees.

III. Policy Considerations for Phase Three

Phase Three of the Urban Forest Priority Action Plan (January 2026-December 2026): Phase Three includes launching the Planning Commission process for developing proposals for new land use and development regulations regarding tree canopy management and preservation, including on private property. The following points are derived from community feedback and may be helpful considerations in Phase Three:

- ✓ The public is likely to reject any barriers to the timely removal of hazardous trees that pose a threat to life or property.
- ✓ Community members are likely to accept regulations, as well as potential fees, regarding the removal of healthy mature trees on private property. Framing such regulations as advancing a public benefit and pairing them with incentives or financial support for tree damage may help increase acceptability
- ✓ The public may be more willing to accept tree regulations on private property if City arborists can be available to help property owners make informed choices.
- ✓ Financial incentives and educational tips that help community members choose to manage and preserve their trees are likely to be effective and widely supported.
- ✓ Robust public engagement and legal analysis will be vital for the success of the Planning Commission's work given strong and often divergent community perspectives regarding private property regulations.

Council Member Kristina Walker graciously acknowledges the many community members and community-based organizations whose feedback and candor contributed to this report, as well as Tacoma's Urban Forest Manager Mike Carey for his support in facilitating these important conversations.

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