



May 18, 2022

Dear Councilmember Raman,

The Los Angeles Community Forest Advisory Committee (CFAC) is tasked with advocating for the protection and expansion of a healthy and robust tree canopy for the City of Los Angeles and its environs. We are dedicated to habitat/ecosystem/biodiversity protection, more sustainable land use, equitable access to nature, and to public health through a more sustainable livable city. As members appointed by each Council District and the Mayor's office, our role is to advise City Council and city departments on tree-related policies and help develop programs which protect and expand the city's urban forest for the health and well-being of all Angelenos.

CFAC strongly believes that an investment in our urban forest will contribute toward advancing the City's climate resilience, sustainability, biodiversity, and equity goals. We are submitting this letter advocating for an increased budget and making our urban forest a priority for livability in our city.

We urge you to continue increasing the budget for the Urban Forestry Division from .25% to 1% of the total city budget, recognize this budget as essential to public health, and protect it from cuts going forward. Additionally, the position of UFD's Chief Forester (previously Tim Tyson) was vacated with the SIP program, although the authority to fill/hire the position was maintained, according to Adel Hagekhalil. This leadership position, preferably from outside of UFD – someone with Planning and Ecology and Arboriculture experience - is critical. We also urge the approval of an ecologist/biologist staff member for the Office of Forest Management (Rachel Malarich) so that the UFMP, Strengthening Protected Tree policies, and creating BMPs for mature tree maintenance be realized with greater urgency.

Trees are an unsurpassed bargain in our City's infrastructure; they remove dust from the air, create windbreaks, capture runoff, muffle urban noise, mitigate air pollution, reduce energy costs, provide much needed shade and ambient cooling, sequester carbon, capture and clean stormwater, support biodiversity, improve public health and wellbeing, and reduce crime. **In California, every \$1 invested in a street tree returns \$5.82 in benefits¹.** But if we reduce or defer the care trees require, we incur otherwise avoidable expenses and liabilities as trees decline and experience early failure and mortality.

¹ McPherson, E. Gregory, Natalie van Doorn, and John de Goede. 2016. Structure, Function, and Values of Street Trees in California, USA. Urban Forestry & Urban 17: April 2016. Pp 104 115. https://www.fs.fed.us/psw/publications/mcpherson/psw_2016_mcpherson004.pdf

Greater emphasis on proactive maintenance can also help mitigate liabilities—**emergency response work costs 2.5 times more per tree than proactive trimming, not including millions paid in tree-related legal settlements.**² To quote the City’s Forest Office, Rachel Malarich: **“this is the only infrastructure that gains value with time.”** Currently the city is on a 21 year trimming cycle - and best management is a 5-7 year cycle, depending on the species.

We urge you to heed the expert analysis and recommendations in the study the City commissioned from Dudek: *First Step Developing An Urban Forest Management Plan for the City of Los Angeles*³, which made the following critical points:

- The Report compared several cities' urban forestry budgets to that of Los Angeles, and found that an estimated budget increase of \$50 million is needed to manage the urban forest at a sustainable level. *The City’s annual per-tree urban forestry budget of approximately \$27 is 140% to 212% less than what comparable cities invest in their urban forest trees each year* (Dudek, p. 15).
- The Dudek Report’s wake-up call comparing Los Angeles' budget practices with those of other cities was amplified by a 2018 comparative study of several cities' urban forestry budgets that found that cities typically allot 1% of their entire budget to the urban forest. By contrast, UFD's budget in Los Angeles is around 0.25% of the City budget, a fraction of what it is in other progressive cities.⁴
- The budget cuts to the Urban Forestry Division during the Great Recession of 2008 resulted in citywide tree neglect and damage, from which we still have not recovered. The cuts also resulted in many dead standing trees that were not removed in reasonable time frames, increasing hazardous conditions and resulting in upward trending tree-related settlements (Dudek, p. 17).

In previous years, we have also suggested means for revenue generation, including:

- Create Landscape Maintenance Assessments
- Create a Green Space funding mechanism akin to the Public Works Improvement Arts Program (PWIAP) and the Private Arts Development Fee (ADF) for all construction and development
- Increase the In Lieu Fee (Tree Guarantee Fee), especially for subsidized residential parkway removals)
- Better coordination to leverage funding from other agencies (Metro, Caltrans) for their capital projects to create multi-benefit, tree-inclusive projects
- Strengthen policies and increase fines for illegal street tree pruning, illegal tree removals, and damage to trees during construction

² Galperin, Ron. *LA's Tree Trimming and Maintenance Program. 2019.* <https://lacontroller.org/auditsand-reports/turning-over-a-new-leaf-l-a-s-tree-trimming-and-maintenance-program/>

³ Dudek. *First Step: Developing an Urban Forest Management Plan for the City of Los Angeles.*

CityPlants, 2018, https://www.cityplants.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/10939_LA-CityPlants_FirstStep_Report_FINAL.pdf

⁴ Stewart, Jill, and Ileana Wachtel. 2018. *L.A.'s Urban Tree Canopy needs a Better Plan.*

- **Utilize the City of Santa Monica’s Tree Valuation tool in order to reflect the monetary value of mature trees to be removed**
- Increase removal fees exponentially for “protected” tree species based on trunk diameter (DBH) and canopy size
- Raise inspection fees charged by UFD to cover the actual costs incurred
- Raise the bond fees developers currently pay to ensure survival of mitigation trees, and extend the bond period from 3 years to 5 years (the industry accepted establishment period for a newly planted sapling). Ensure that cost for staff time to inspect those trees is fully recouped, and increased to discourage neglect or removal
- Set a high fee schedule for removal of private property trees which are routinely removed by developers at time of demolition without any consideration of loss of canopy and ecosystem services. Double the fee (or more) if removed illegally to incentivize proper procedure e.g. \$10,000 minimum to remove; \$25,000 if removed illegally, or use the City of Santa Monica’s Valuation tool.
- Instruct BOE to find ways in which access and rebate requests for Sidewalk Repair can reward residents who preserve their parkway trees, and remove barriers (cost & liability). Leverage NC funding for alternative designs that preserve trees.
- Set inspection fees for UFD & LADBS to ensure compliance with Tree & Root Protection Zones for street trees adjacent to construction projects. Currently, valuable mature street trees are being damaged or destroyed by the parking of heavy equipment and storage of materials around trees

Past experience has shown budget cuts to the City's urban forestry programs during times of fiscal stress to be not only a false economy, but a recipe for significant future costs through the loss of and irreparable damage to our highly valuable green infrastructure, and damage settlements from tree-related claims. Lessons learned from the disastrous consequences to our urban forest of the post-2008 recession budget cuts can profitably guide your decisions as you consider the next urban forestry budget. We, CFAC, are poised and happy to help with your decision making, and thank you for your leadership in making our city the best it can be.

Respectfully,



Shelley Billik
Chair, CFAC