



# REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

OFFICE OF CITY AUDITOR – SEATTLE

May XX, 2009

## City's Management of Trees Can Be Improved

### Audit Background

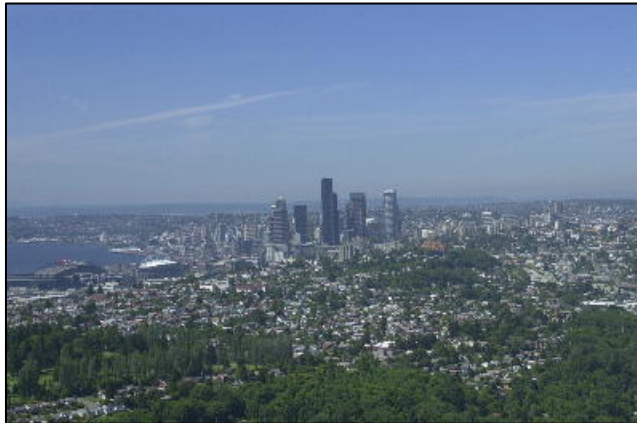
The City's tree canopy covers 18 percent of Seattle. The April 2007 Urban Forest Management Plan calls for increasing Seattle's canopy cover to 30 percent in 30 years, and recommends steps that the City should take to preserve, maintain, and enhance the City's urban forest to meet that goal.

The City's management of its urban forest is decentralized among nine City departments with tree management or regulatory responsibilities.

### Audit Objectives

The City Council requested that the Office of City Auditor review the City's management of its trees. To help evaluate the effectiveness of the City's urban forestry management program, we:

- Examined the types of actions taken by the City and other stakeholders to implement the Urban Forest Management Plan;
- Identified challenges the City faces in attaining and sustaining the Plan's goals; and
- Identified approaches that may be useful in charting a course for future actions to enhance tree management efforts.



Source: Seattle Municipal Archives #114396

### City Lacks Effective Overall Framework for Urban Forestry Management

While the City has identified tree preservation and increased tree canopy as priorities and individual City department efforts are underway to implement these priorities, the City's current management framework is not effective for guiding and overseeing these efforts.

- **The executive-level body for implementing the Urban Forest Management Plan was not operational until 2009.** Until this year, the executive-level body responsible for implementing the Urban Forest Management Plan was not functioning, and there was no mechanism for elevating operational and policy issues brought up at the departmental level for resolution.
- **The City's Urban Forest Management Plan lacks clear and effective leadership.** We found that the City's current approach to tree issues lacks top leadership with the authority and accountability to best ensure implementation of the Urban Forest Management Plan. While the Mayor tasked the Office of Sustainability and Environment (OSE) with this leadership role, we found that there was no agreement within City government or in the public about where program leadership resides. While OSE believes they have the authority and accountability for the Urban Forest Management Plan's implementation, this is not widely known within City government and to the public. Effective leadership will resolve conflicts and provide a clear focal point to unify all the City departments behind a single mission.
- **The City needs comprehensive plans for reaching its canopy goal.** Although the Urban Forest Management Plan states that it is a "roadmap for a strategic approach", it does not address: 1) concrete methods and resources to reach the City's canopy goal; 2) performance measures to evaluate and monitor overall progress in meeting the canopy goal; 3) external factors that could impact the Urban Forest Management Plan; and 4) ongoing program evaluations to adjust goals and strategies if necessary.

# DRAFT FOR REVIEW & DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY



## **Stronger Cooperation and Coordination between Stakeholders Needed**

Effective cooperation and coordination on tree management issues is essential, though not ensured, among City departments and outside stakeholders. This is a challenge when the urban forest competes with utility and transportation infrastructure for limited space in the public right-of-way. Utility and transportation infrastructure includes overhead and underground power lines, trolley lines, roads, sidewalks, trails, drainage and waste water pipes and vaults, and telecommunication equipment. Conflicting goals exist between City departments and outside agencies, and even within departments. Without effective partnerships and collaboration, the City's ability to meet urban forest and sustainability goals is compromised. For example, Seattle City Light (SCL) recommends that trees planted under power lines should have a mature height of not more than 25 feet for safety and reliability reasons. However, trees are continually being planted that exceed that requirement. The Seattle Department of Transportation's (SDOT) tree planting list which is used for the department's tree planting decisions differs from what SCL and other utility jurisdictions believe are the appropriate size trees to plant under power lines.

## **Increased Emphasis on Public Outreach and Education Needed**

Most of Seattle's trees are on private property and the greatest potential for planting new trees is also on private property. To achieve urban forestry goals, City government needs the support of its citizens. Hence, public outreach and education to promote proper management of privately owned trees and to encourage new tree planting are paramount in the City's effort to sustain and expand the City's tree canopy. OSE has developed and implemented public outreach and education with

limited resources, and will require adequate resources to continue this effort. OSE will have fewer resources in 2009 than in 2008 for these efforts.

## **Tree Inventory Needed for Making Sound Resource Management Decisions**

Instead of performing a tree by tree inventory, the City is currently engaged in a satellite canopy assessment of Seattle. Officials believe that this assessment coupled with judicious and statistically valid sampling of individual trees will provide a reliable measure of the size and health of the City's urban forest. The City does not currently have a complete inventory of City-managed trees that would enable it to make sound resource management decisions. By accumulating, updating, and using information collected by a tree inventory, urban forest managers can forecast trends, anticipate maintenance needs, facilitate budgeting for tree-related expenditures, and develop long range plans. Currently, only SDOT and the Department of Parks and Recreation (Parks) are performing tree inventories. SDOT is collecting inventory data on 35,000 street trees for which it is responsible (this is approximately 26 percent of all street trees in Seattle). Parks has inventoried trees in approximately 10 to 15 percent of its developed parks, according to a Parks official.

## **City Goals Need to Include Realistic Funding Assumptions**

Funding is a challenge to implementing and sustaining effective tree management, according to City officials. While some tree improvements are inexpensive, most require substantial and continuous funding. Demand for funding has far outstripped the amounts made available. For example, SDOT and Parks requested respectively \$1.1 million and \$500,000 for the 2009-2010 biennium for tree crews to conduct tree maintenance. However, neither request was funded. Budget restraints will require that the City carefully prioritize and plan how to maximize urban forestry goals within available resources.

## **Implementing New Tree Regulations Is an Important Next Step for Tree Preservation**

The Department of Planning and Development (DPD) has been evaluating the existing tree protection regulations that govern tree retention on private property. Since that began, the Mayor proposed new interim tree regulations in September 2008 and the City Council passed these regulations in 2009. The new regulations will close a loophole used by developers to remove trees before applying for a development permit. The City has slowed down the regulations development process until the new satellite canopy cover analysis is completed. It is anticipated that new tree regulations will be proposed in late 2009. In addition, DPD will conduct an analysis to determine the resources necessary to fully implement the new regulations.

# DRAFT FOR REVIEW & DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY

A copy of the Office of City Auditor's full report can be obtained at the Auditor's website at <http://seattle.gov/audit> or by calling (206) 233-3801. Please direct any questions or comments regarding this report, or suggestions for future audits to Susan Cohen, Seattle City Auditor, at (206) 233-3801 or [susan.cohen@seattle.gov](mailto:susan.cohen@seattle.gov)