

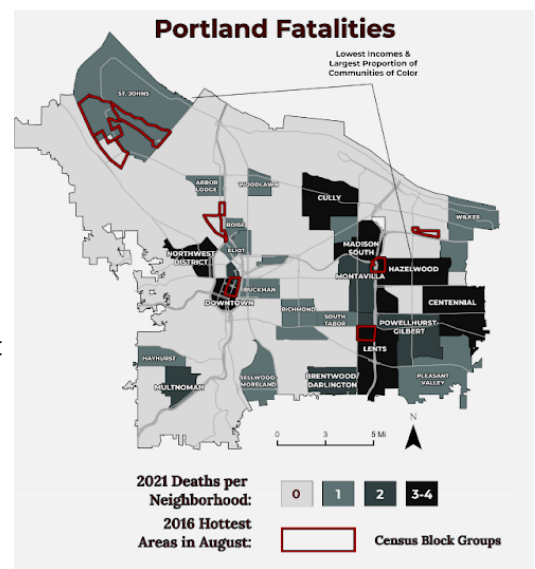


March 16, 2022

Dear Mayor Ted Wheeler and Portland City Commissioners;

We, the undersigned organizations, urge the City to resume and expedite work to improve shade equity in Portland which it began thirteen years ago. In 2009<sup>1</sup> and again in May 2017, scientists, urban forestry experts, Portland’s Urban Forestry Commission and the tree advocacy community proposed that the City Council create a Right of Way (ROW) and *Street Tree Asset Management Strategy* to set Portland on the course to minimize urban heat islands and provide shade for all. This included a Council work session in November 2017 that left everyone pleased and hopeful about next steps. Unfortunately, the City took little further action, while extreme heat events and shade inequity both intensified.

It is important to clarify that Portland’s urban forest is divided into four management categories: 1) trees in public natural areas & parks, 2) public trees in street ROWs throughout the City, 3) trees on residential land and 4) trees on industrial land. According to 2002 data, street trees and commercial/industrial lands were the furthest from meeting canopy targets. While the City made some large investments in park tree maintenance this year, the delay in implementing a *Street Tree Asset Management Strategy* has increased health and safety risks for low-income community members living in local heat islands. Recent data from Dr. Vivek Shandas indicates that from 2014-2020 existing heat islands expanded, and tree canopy declined, in 29 of Portland’s 30 most populous neighborhoods. **Worst of all, there are no plans to aggressively reverse the trend – even after five dozen Portlanders perished in the June 2021 heat dome.** The cost of inaction also includes the foregone services of cooling, air filtration, stormwater management, access to nature, safer



<sup>1</sup> [Initial Assessment of the Costs of Managing Street Trees as a Public Asset](#), June 2009.

bike/ped corridors, and improved public health outcomes, which an expanded urban tree canopy – especially by large-form trees – would have provided.

Portland leaders are juggling housing and policing crises, while deep climate resiliency preparedness has been sitting in the corner.<sup>2</sup> At the core of street tree inaction is a failure to account for trees as appreciable infrastructure assets that provide increasing services over time. Fortunately, there is a clear path forward. We can follow the lead of the [many cities](#) across the U.S. that invest in their right-of-way tree infrastructure through robust canopy expansion partnerships, funding street tree planting and full life-cycle maintenance. Like the urban tree canopy, Portland’s street tree stewardship has [much room for growth](#) (2017 presentation).

### **The problems, as defined in 2017, have not changed:**

#### *1. Portland has no street/right-of-way tree maintenance program and city code requires adjacent property owners to maintain public property (Title 11, Trees).*

Consequences:

- Inequity: Many Portlanders do not have access to the cooling, air filtration, and other benefits of tree canopy. Summer temperatures in low-income, low-canopy areas can be **13 degrees F** higher than those in Portland’s wealthier, high-canopy areas. [See the chart at the 2:05 mark [in this clip from The Daily Show with Trevor Noah](#)]
- Lower income, elderly residents, small business owners and landlords are reluctant to plant street trees due to increased labor and high long-term maintenance costs.
- There is a backlog of street trees in poor condition from lack of professional care, creating public safety hazards and costly emergency response activities after storm and wind events.
- Life expectancy, ecosystem services, and the value of street tree assets are reduced by a lack of long-term professional care.
- Street tree establishment rates are not as high as they could be. The trend of hotter, longer summers increases the need for maintenance to improve tree survival rates.
- Street trees are not tracked/accounted for closely like other valued city assets.
- The City can’t use capital funds to create and establish tree infrastructure as it is currently categorized in the budget.

#### *2. Street trees are not adequately prioritized in street/ROW improvements and new development.*

Consequences:

- Street trees are often removed during development.
- Currently, Urban Forestry staff and community members are responsible for making the case to preserve individual street trees. They must propose ways of avoiding tree removal (rubber sidewalks, meandering sidewalks, relocating infrastructure, or redesigning a street or development). **This is backwards; preserving trees should be the norm in Portland. PBOT (and ODOT) engineers should bear the burden of justifying removal.**
- Areas with unimproved ROWs are at high risk of tree loss when sidewalks are installed. This is of special concern in East Portland, which has seen a historic disinvestment in pedestrian infrastructure.
- Best practices in preventing tree-sidewalk conflict are not standard protocol.

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<sup>2</sup> [In early January 2022, City Council](#) did approve a \$10 million PCEF grant for Earth Advantage to install heat pumps in low-income households.

- PBOT specifies narrow furnishing zones, which are insufficient for planting the large-form street trees, which are necessary for mitigating local heat islands.
- Trees are seen to be in competition with sidewalks, utility vaults, water lines, bike parking, signs, etc.
- Private property owners are replacing large street trees with small-form trees, even in wide planting strips.<sup>3</sup>

**While the problems remain the same, the context has significantly changed.**

In addition to the stark realization that the climate crisis is upon us causing an urgent need for emergency adaptation measures, COVID, the houseless crisis, and the 2020 racial justice movement helped more people recognize the many injustices that pulse through Portland. These include deep income and racial disparities evident in the social determinants of health, which refer to lack of access to jobs, healthcare, good schools, wealth-building opportunities, as well as a history of racist zoning and land use patterns. We now know that many of Portland’s tree-deficient neighborhoods correlate with historically redlined areas.<sup>4</sup>

**This ongoing injustice demands a proactive, community-focused government response.** The urban tree canopy will not flourish by simply hiring more city workers to plant and maintain trees. Growing a vibrant urban ecosystem requires community investment and ownership, job training, relationship building, and administering resources to support youth development. Establishing a strong street tree maintenance program citywide can help Portland accomplish all of these. It is imperative that City bureaus support a collaborative approach to achieving canopy expansion and equitable distribution goals, and fully leverage city resources to build capacity for community-based street tree maintenance and job training.

**Moving Forward**

It’s time to pick up the ball dropped in 2017 and resume the essential work to: 1) recognize trees as appreciable assets, 2) create a plan to assume full legal and financial responsibility for ROW, street trees, and tree-related sidewalk repairs; 3) ensure sufficient space for large-form street trees in all City plans; and 4) work in partnership with community-based organizations that are ready for this long-overdue investment in human and natural capital. [Other cities](#) have done it, and Portland can, too.

Of all the plans made in 2017, one thing *was* accomplished: Portland Parks updated the 2009 Davey Tree study referenced earlier with the title, [“Managing Street Trees as Green Infrastructure - Cost Assessment.”](#) This report is an essential resource but does not recommend strategies for funding street tree management<sup>5</sup> or include the cost of tree-related sidewalk repairs. We understand that Portland Parks and Recreation’s Sustainable Futures team is exploring options for the City to assume street tree maintenance at some point in the future, but we believe the urgency of this issue calls for an expedited process that includes robust community participation in both creation *and* implementation.

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<sup>3</sup> Residents’ motivations have not been studied, but people suspect it is, in part, due to perceived risk, long-term financial liability, and/or leaf cleanup hassles associated with med- and large-form trees, which provide the lionshare of benefits. This is another reason to elevate the role of the City in managing trees in street ROWs.

<sup>4</sup> Hoffman, J., Shandas, V., Pendleton, N., The Effects of Historical Housing Policies on Resident Exposure to Intra-Urban Heat: A Study of 108 US Urban Areas, *Climate* 2020, 8, [www.mdpi.com/journal/climate](http://www.mdpi.com/journal/climate).

<sup>5</sup> American Public Works Association, [“Budgeting & Funding: Urban Forestry Best Management Practices for Public Works Managers.”](#)

**This year, while Portland is making critical investments in climate resiliency, we urge the City to build on the Davey report by funding an investigation of City-led street tree management financing options.** As part of the spring 2022 biennial budget-making process, Portland Parks proposes to spend \$3 million over two years to plant 6,000 trees in east Portland using American Rescue Plan Act funds. We agree that more tree planting is needed in Portland, but planting alone will not get us to our climate goals - we need long-term investment in community-based tree care. While we support this PPR budget request, we ask that the City spend \$50,000 of these monies on an economic study to investigate financing alternatives for the City to assume responsibility for long-term street tree maintenance.<sup>6</sup>

To help Portland residents take pride in and ownership of their nearby street trees, we also encourage the City to migrate [the street tree inventory](#) to an interactive community science platform. Tools such as OpenTreeMap can help neighbors grasp the ecosystem services provided by each tree, see empty planting sites as potential for growth; individuals can also update or add missing tree data and take condition notes. [New York's system](#) even allows pedestrians to report a maintenance issue such as a needed sidewalk repair, using a smartphone app.

We recognize that accomplishing these policy objectives and building a campaign to secure the necessary funds will require an integrated strategy developed by community leaders, urban forestry advocates, workforce development proponents, the public health sector, businesses, pedestrian and multimodal transportation advocates, environmental and climate justice organizations, neighborhoods, and other stakeholders. We intend this letter to begin these discussions. We will contact you shortly to set up meetings to discuss how **you can support the rapid completion of this urgent legacy work. The next generations are counting on us to get this right.**

In solidarity,

Brenna Bell, **350PDX**  
Noelle Studer-Spevak, **Families for Climate**  
Kyna Rubin, **Trees for Life Oregon**  
Derron Coles, **The Blueprint Foundation**  
Heather Keisler Fornes, **Portland Fruit Tree Project**  
Yashar Vasef, **Friends of Trees**  
Ted Labbe, **Urban Greenspaces Institute**  
Samantha Hernandez, **Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility**

Maia Vasconez-Taylor, **OPAL Environmental Justice**  
Sergio Lopez, **Verde**  
Diana Meisenhelter, **Extinction Rebellion PDX**  
Amy Henrikson, **Portland Youth Climate Council**  
Sarah Iannarone, **The Street Trust**  
Debra Higbee-Sudyka, **Oregon Chapter Sierra Club**  
Micah Meskel, **Portland Audubon**  
Kiel Johnson, **BikeLoud**  
Gregory J Wolley, **Creating Tomorrow's Workforce**

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<sup>6</sup> We have spoken with a contractor who provided this \$50,000 ballpark estimate and encourage council members to include this in the budget discussions that are underway.