Dallas Urban Forest Master Plan 2021

Briefing Note

June 1, 2021

Topic: Adoption of the Dallas Urban Forest Master Plan

Issue: **Dallas lacks a strategic plan for its urban forest that creates a unified vision, centralizes management, and activates cohesive action to maximize the benefits of urban trees, and aggregate costs and economic investments.**

Background

Urban Forests are a capital asset that provide critical environmental, social, economic, and physical benefits to our city. The City of Dallas (City) has never had a comprehensive plan for managing the urban forest and for many years urban forestry activities have been managed within various departments diffusing responsibilities, resulting in redundancy of efforts and missed opportunities. As the importance of the urban forest has become more apparent, the need for strategic management of this asset has become vital. When properly managed, trees provide a myriad of benefits, including stormwater mitigation, heat reduction, air quality improvement and improved health, wellness, and quality of life for Dallas residents. Currently, the City has a tree canopy that is unevenly distributed across the city, limiting these benefits for some residents.

The Texas Trees Foundation began a decade ago to study the Dallas urban forest, including the challenges and opportunities it faces, to understand the forest resource and advise the City on best management practices. The Foundation published several urban forestry reports, including the State of the Dallas Urban Forest (2015 and 2019) and the Urban Heat Island Management Study (2017). This investment of funding and effort has culminated in the creation the **Dallas Urban Forest Master Plan 2021** (Plan). This Plan will better focus the City on how to invest, protect, expand, and manage this important resource for a better return on investment and to maximize this resource to leverage various carbon credit opportunities.

The City has also acknowledged the need to manage its urban forest through the Comprehensive Environment and Climate Action Plan (CECAP), forwardDallas!, Article X and other strategic plans, but still lacks a unified vision and centralized management. In fact, CECAP, previously adopted by Dallas City Council, calls for the writing of an urban forest master plan to ensure proper urban forest management, which the Texas Trees Foundation has provided.

The collaborative work between the Texas Trees Foundation and the City of Dallas, with funding from Lyda Hill Philanthropies and ONCOR, enabled the development of the first Dallas Urban Forest Master Plan 2021, a long-term strategic guiding document designed specifically to address the challenges of urban heat, rapid development, and impediments to human health and wellbeing that affect City of Dallas residents.

Discussion

The Environmental and Sustainability Committee of Dallas's city council was given a summary of the Dallas Urban Forest Master Plan 2021 on February 1, 2021. The Plan is currently scheduled for Dallas city council's consideration for approval on June 9. The Plan has 14 recommendations to help care for, protect, and grow this tree canopy, its biodiversity, and the ecosystems it supports. This resource was valued at over $9 billion in ecosystem benefits and replacement cost (*State of the Dallas Urban Forest* 2015). For the urban forest to provide the most benefits to Dallas, **City Council must adopt the Dallas Urban Forest Master Plan 2021** and implement its recommendations.

The most pressing recommendations are to inventory the trees on City property as well as to centralize the management of urban forestry under one City department. (This has become more urgent with the oncoming Emerald Ash Borer infestation.) The Plan aims to create a centralized vision, designed to streamline urban forestry management towards a proactive approach, and provide tools for urban forest managers to care for and grow the City's forest resource more effectively. Through its participation in the development of the plan, the City identified the need to centralize urban forestry management to ensure its success.

Through the Plan's development process, concerns emerged that, at times, "Dallas is good at planning, but poor at execution." Two related challenges facing the successful implementation of the Plan are the momentum to execute structural changes, and the funding to make those changes actualized and meaningful. Given these persistent challenges, it is critical that the City makes strategic investments in their urban forest assets to maximize return on investment. Through the adoption of the Plan, the City's decision-makers must commit to monitor and advocate for the ongoing implementation of the Plan and related tree management plans.

Options

Option 1: Status Quo - No Action

The City of Dallas does not adopt the Plan and continues to maintain its current management style of diffused responsibility over this $9 billion urban forest asset.

Pros

- No additional up-front cost is incurred.
- No need for organizational redevelopment to create centralized urban forestry activity.
- Enables Dallas to focus on other high priority issues.

Cons

- The ongoing decentralized management structure of the urban forest fosters the continued problem of localized canopy reduction, loss of tree benefits, and inequitable resource allocation across the City.
- Gives the City the false belief that its urban forest asset is self-managing and requires minimal investment and attention (imagine expecting roads, sidewalks, or other capital assets to be self-managing).
- The City's urban forest continues to be reactively managed, incurring more back-end costs for maintenance.
- Tree planting is sporadic, and CECAP Canopy Cover goals are not likely to be met.
- The $50,000 contribution from the City for the Plan provides no return on investment.

Option 2: Adoption of the Plan and Implementation of its Recommendations (Recommended)

The City adopts the Plan in full, including all its goals and recommendations, and begins to implement those recommendations to strategically manage its $9 billion capital asset.

Pros

- The City adopts a unified and coherent vision for its urban forest and tree management and a unified voice and consistent messaging that can be shared and communicated both within and outside the City's management structure.
- The City inventories the trees it currently manages, allowing for focused measurement and management.
- The City aggressively tackles longstanding issues of extreme urban heat and unevenly distributed tree canopy by planting and protecting trees.
- The City's tree canopy grows strategically, meeting CECAP goals for increased tree cover.
- Trees more effectively improve the health and wellbeing of Dallas residents and visitors.
- Dallas can create a model for a large city urban forestry department in North Texas and beyond.
- The Plan supports the city's commitment to tree planting and protection through the Trillion Trees Initiative.

- Departments responsible for urban forestry and trees gain centralized decision-making.
- The City can use this strategic document to drive decision-making toward coherence, consistency, and success.
- The City adopts a strategic approach to urban forest management including tree maintenance, storm response, pest, wood utilization, and disease response (e.g., Emerald Ash Borer (EAB), oak wilt), tree plantings and other critical aspects of Urban Forestry.
- The City grows its partnerships with vital non-profits, community groups, and its citizens.

Cons
- The City will have to adjust its existing approach to decision-making and urban forest management and embark on a restructuring of departmental responsibilities and budgeting.
- City's current urban forestry expenditure would need to adjust to effectively implement these recommendations.

Option 3: Adoption of the Plan with Minimal or No Implementation of its Recommendations

The City adopts the Plan but does not pursue meaningful implementation of the recommendations.

Pros
- The mandate in the CECAP to write an urban forest master plan is completed.
- No need for organizational redevelopment to create centralized urban forestry activity.
- Enables Dallas to focus on other high priority issues, while appearing to be invested in urban forests.

Cons
- The ongoing decentralized management structure of the urban forest fosters the continued problem of localized canopy reduction, loss of tree benefits, and inequitable resource allocation across the City of Dallas.
- Gives the City the false belief that the urban forest asset is self-managing and requires minimal investment and attention (imagine expecting roads, sidewalks, or other capital assets to be self-managing).
- The City creates a perception of action on urban forestry, while delaying effective implementation for months or years.
- The City's urban forest continues to be reactively managed, incurring more back-end costs for maintenance.
- Tree planting is sporadic, and CECAP Canopy Cover goals are not likely to be met.
- The $50,000 contribution from the City for this Plan provides no return on investment.

Recommendation - Option 2

Option 2 moves the City toward its goals laid out in previously adopted plans and begins a shift toward best management approaches for urban forestry management. Trees are an important part of the solution in addressing the challenges facing Dallas and making the city sustainable and resilient. However, to harness and maximize the benefits the urban forest provides – trees must become a priority in Dallas. Adoption of the Dallas Urban Forest Master Plan 2021 is the first step in making trees a priority, but relentless focus on the implementation of its recommendations is vital to actualizing the full benefits that urban trees can provide.