

# Oakland Needs Action to Protect, Maintain, and Enhance Its Urban Forest

To: Oakland City Council, Mayor, and City Administrator

**Summary:** Oakland needs a comprehensive green-city strategy to protect, maintain, and enhance its urban forest, in order to maximize its environmental, economic, and social benefits while making it more resilient to natural or manmade threats. **With the recession behind us, we urge the City Council to invest wisely in Oakland's trees: restore funding for the PWA Tree Services Division to at least the 2007 level, fund an Urban Forestry Management Plan, and establish an Urban Forestry Commission or Task Force.**

## Background:

Trees form a critical part of the infrastructure that allows a city to function in its environment. Trees can be long-lived public assets if they receive proper care. Cities must therefore invest in trees collectively as an urban forest, just as they invest in streets, sidewalks, water and sewer lines, streetlights, and more. Indeed, trees are the only kind of infrastructure that increases in value over time.

A properly managed urban forest provides many **benefits—\$5.82 in benefits per \$1.00 spent, according to a recent study in California**—such as these:

- *Environmental* – Reducing greenhouse gases, mitigating climate change, improving air quality, reducing stormwater runoff and erosion, improving resiliency to wildfires, reducing the urban heat island effect, and providing habitat for wildlife.
- *Economic* – Reducing use of energy for heating or cooling, increasing property values, increasing business patronage, providing local raw material in the form of urban wood, reducing sick days, and creating jobs.
- *Social* – Encouraging walking and outdoor play, calming traffic, reducing crime, reducing stress, improving health, improving learning and test scores at schools, and enhancing a sense of place and community

In short, the quality of life of the people (and other creatures) who live, work, and play in the city is inextricably linked to trees.

To this end, the City of Oakland already has several **strengths** in its favor:

- Tree canopy that covers almost 25% of the City's land area: at least 40,000 street-trees; tens of thousands of other trees in parks, medians, and other public lands; and many trees on private property
- Supportive policies, including the Energy & Climate Action Plan (ECAP); Open Space, Conservation and Recreation element (OSCAR); Priority Conservation Areas (PCAs); General Plan; Resilience Plan; draft Green Infrastructure Plan; and proposed Vegetation Management Plan for the wildland/urban interface
- A history of grant funding and research projects with community groups
- Many green-minded and environmentally-concerned businesses
- A caring and committed populace of tree proponents representing diverse backgrounds and ideas, including the Oakland Urban Forestry Forum (OUFF), an unofficial body that meets monthly and comprises City staff, community organizations, teachers, planners, State agencies, and concerned residents

However, the City also suffers from a number of **weaknesses** affecting its urban forest:

- An understaffed Tree Services Division, unable to perform proactive maintenance on young or mature trees, or to plant more trees
- Inequitable distribution of trees, especially visible in the flatlands of West and East Oakland
- No clear or current tree inventory, economic analysis, or urban forest management plan
- No cost-of-living adjustment in the Landscape & Lighting Assessment District fee, and imminent expiration of the Wildfire Prevention Assessment District
- An outdated equipment fleet that cannot meet current workload demands
- Inability to enforce the penalties for illegal pruning or removal of trees
- Assigning responsibility to property owners to maintain the trees on adjacent City streets
- Lack of maintenance of trees in parks and open spaces, leading to greater fire risks and safety hazards
- Lack of clear communication among City departments with jurisdiction over the urban forest, and between the City and outside tree groups, utilities, commercial entities, or other interested parties
- Inability to pursue new grants

We are at a critical juncture where the City of Oakland can shape its environmental future. It would be wise to take advantage of the **opportunities** that exist: cutting-edge research and technologies available to extol the virtues of urban forests; the City's unique position to leverage grants and private funding; economic stimulus through the use of local urban wood; green building credits or sales on the cap-and-trade carbon market; along with a caring and skilled network of City staff and community members. If the City ignores its trees, however, various potential **threats** could decimate not only the urban forest but also those whose lives it shapes: greater damage to trees from pests and diseases, as well as vandalism and human-caused maladies; stresses from development and population growth; damage to life or property from hazardous, improperly maintained trees; declining canopy coverage if trees dying of old age are not replaced; unmitigated effects of drought, rising temperatures, and wildfire; and worsening social and economic inequity between the parts of town with many trees and those with few.

### **Actions Needed:**

1) **Allocate at least \$5.3 million annually plus one-time purchases of \$1.6 million in the FY2017-2019 Budget for Tree Services.**

In 2007, before the recession, the PWA Tree Services Division had a budget of \$4.4 million with a staff of 30. The 2016-17 budget is \$3.3 million but the staff is only 15. Managing the City's current urban forest responsibility would involve at least 30 staff members (budget of \$5.3 million for salaries, overhead, and other operations & maintenance costs) plus \$1.6 million to buy new trucks and other equipment, replacing items that have outlived their useful service life. We can forward the list of services that would be restored by increasing staff to these levels, and the proposed list of equipment to be bought. Since Oakland's urban forest has grown for 8 years without proper maintenance, providing even more funding to Tree Services would allow them to deal with this backlog sooner. Restoring the City's young-tree maintenance program is especially important, since it costs less to prune young trees than old ones, and proper early maintenance reduces future problems and damage (City liability) from large broken limbs, inadequate headroom over the street and sidewalk, or interference with buildings and other infrastructure.

2) **Allocate \$650,000 to create an Oakland Urban Forestry Management Plan, including an inventory of public trees along streets and medians and in urban parks.**

The plan, in coordination with existing plans and policies, would address the following aspects: a city-wide inventory of public trees, goals for canopy cover or absolute numbers of trees, funding sources, economic analysis of tree resources (e.g. iTree or Tree Carbon Calculator), maintenance and replacement, urban wood utilization, carbon cap-and-trade considerations, mitigation of threats to forest health, creation of firebreaks in the wildland/urban interface, conflicting ordinances and practices, enforcement of regulations, fee collections & allocation, equity planning, partnerships and memoranda of understanding (MOUs), and best management practices. Although City staff have applied for a grant to fund this plan, the budget must ensure money even if Oakland does not receive the grant. They estimated that the inventory would cost \$490,000-\$540,000 (including all trees along streets and medians and in urban parks, but not in open space or wildland parks, such as Joaquin Miller or Knowland Park), and the plan would cost \$75,000-150,000.

3) **Establish a permanent Urban Forestry Commission or temporary Task Forces to facilitate the development of plans, policies, and projects affecting the urban forest.**

San Francisco's successful Urban Forestry Council could serve as a model. If the Council does not authorize OUFF as an official city Commission, it could create a task force to provide input on narrower short-term objectives, such as the creation of an urban forestry management plan.

We believe strongly that these actions would allow the City of Oakland to become a leader in environmental stewardship, making it one of the greenest cities in the nation and the world. We envision a city that prides itself on its tree-lined streets and beautiful parks and natural places, embracing not only present but also future generations of citizens, businesses, visitors, and wildlife alike, through its ecologically progressive policies.

*The Oakland Urban Forestry Forum (OUFF) presents this document with a coalition of Oakland-based groups, including neighborhood associations, park and wildland advocates, and business improvement districts. OUFF has been working with the Public Works and Planning Departments since 2011 to support urban forestry efforts in Oakland. We are happy to discuss the elements of this statement further. Respectfully submitted to the City Council of Oakland this 8th day of January, 2017.*