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Seattle Urban Forestry Commission Feedback on King County 30 - Year Forest Plan

The Seattle Urban Forestry Commission wants to thank Sarah Brandt for her updating us on King County's 30 - year Forest Plan. We support this undertaking on a county level because of the complexity and interaction of the many different land uses and environmental issues involving forestry across the county.

We see King County being able to help coordinate and share best practices and planning across the county by bringing together the many diverse interests that benefit and are impacted by decisions affecting our forested landscape.

Seattle and other cities in King County have many overlapping interests in maintaining, protecting and enhancing the benefits that urban forests provide to those living in our urban areas. We suggest the following as things the county can do to help urban areas do a better job in managing environmental concerns relating to forestry.

A multitude of different tree and urban forest protection ordinances and forest management plans exist across the county. Each city pretty much comes up with its own process for drafting and updating these ordinances and management plans. While the basic issues are pretty much the same, cities act pretty much independently and frequently lack the resources and expertise to evaluate the benefits or problems associated with different ways of regulating tree and forest protection. The county could help in several ways.

One is to assist in periodic LIDAR studies to measure canopy cover across the county that would provide a baseline for cities as well as the rest of the county to assess gains and losses in tree canopy over time. A baseline is needed and then periodic updates. The King Conservation District did a LIDAR study several years ago that a number of cities participated in. We recommend that at a minimum King County do such a study at least every 5 years that is available to all.

We urge that this study not just be a ground cover canopy assessment by area but that it also assesses canopy volume. We are losing large trees across the county and in cities. Replanting with small trees may give a similar canopy area over time but the loss of large trees is a loss in ecological services including reductions in carbon sequestration and mitigating storm water runoff. Also lost are air pollution mitigation, wildlife habitat and reducing heat island impacts in cities to name a few concerns. A LIDAR study can also help to clarify forest species diversity by doing a leaf off study the percentage of evergreen and conifer species can be measured in an area.

Seattle is starting a Natural Capital Assessment to assign value to our natural environment and the benefits it provides. King County should consider a similar action as part of its forestry plan.

Another way that King County can assist urban areas is by working with other entities like the Washington State Department of Natural Resources Urban and Community Forestry, the US Forest Service Urban and Community Forestry, and King Conservation District in conducting workshops for urban areas on developing effective tree and urban forest ordinances and urban forestry management plans. Bringing people together to discuss what is working and not working would be a great benefit to the county in implementing an effective forest plan. There is no reason why each city must start from scratch and independently develop ordinances and forest management plans, rather than sharing and helping each other in improving on what they have learned.

Sharing information on climate impacts to our trees and forests and insuring species diversity and resilience is important. Looking at the total ecosystem impacts must be considered. Forestry is more than just trees. It includes associated plants, and shrubs and wildlife. The totality, interrelationships and functionality of forests, both rural and urban, must be considered as our region grows in population.

Another option here is to put together a King County Urban Forestry Advisory Board that meets periodically and shares information. King County has already created a King County Rural Forestry Commission which meets bimonthly. There is a need for a similar board for urban areas.

We also urge King County to make efforts to include other entities in its outreach and future involvement. These include dealing with Washington state entities like the Washington State Department of Transportation and the Washington State Department of Ecology and Federal Agencies that own land in King County. Another important entity to include is exploring ways to involve school districts and students in efforts to protect and increase our forests. These will be their forests in the future.

Thank you for your outreach and efforts to create a 30-year Forestry plan for King County. The Seattle Urban Forestry Commission supports your efforts and looks forward to working with you.