



Date: February 14, 2022

To: Dave Somers, Snohomish County Executive  
Mike McCrary, Director, Planning and Development Services  
Tom Teigen, Director, Dept. of Conservation and Natural Resources  
Snohomish County Planning Commission  
Snohomish County Council

Via: Email

RE: New policy on urban tree canopy

Dear Executive Somers, Director McCrary, Director Teigen, Planning Commission and County Council,

The undersigned people and organizations recommend adoption of the proposed new policy on urban tree canopy into the General Policy Plan (GPP) during the process for the 2024 Update to the Snohomish County Growth Management Act Comprehensive Plan. We ask that the Urban Tree Canopy Policy below be included as part of the highest priorities relating to climate change.

Sincerely,

Jeanne Crevier  
President



Climate Alliance of Snohomish County



Livable Snohomish County

Interfaith Climate Action



Mayor Linda Redmon and the Snohomish City Council

Mayor Kyoko Matsumoto Wright and the City of Mountlake Terrace



Edmonds United Methodist Church Advocates for Justice – Environment



The Delta Neighborhood Association, Everett



Snohomish County Climate Advocates



Hilltop-Locust Community Group

Edmonds Unitarian Universalist Congregation



Jennie Lindberg & Dean Smith, Co-founders - Sunnyside Village Cohousing

Jeanine San Clemente

Diane Buckshnis, Edmonds City Council



Amend the Natural Environment Chapter of the General Policy Plan to add a new section with narrative, a new goal, objectives, and policies.

### **Urban Tree Canopy**

Trees and tree canopy are necessary for cultural, historic, and ecosystem services and are a significant part of life in the Pacific Northwest. There is a need for a holistic framework that promotes efficient land use to accommodate growth and ensure the region is a healthy, attractive place to live as Snohomish County grows with the projected addition to the Urban Growth Area of almost 226,680 residents and 127,640 jobs over the next fourteen years. The question of how to maintain an urban tree canopy while maximizing housing affordability and economic development is an increasingly important issue but finding a balance is possible.

The following goals and objectives address the challenge of how to balance the need to plan for growth and development while maintaining livability and a holistic approach for a healthy tree canopy in urban areas. Promoting a shared approach to retaining or replanting trees would result in equitable access to trees, resulting in comprehensive public health and aesthetic benefits; widespread ecological benefits including air quality, water quality, wildlife habitat, and reduction of the urban heat island effect. Additionally, a universal and predictable approach to tree retention can potentially streamline planning and construction costs and timeline.

Urban forests and tree canopy are necessary for healthy communities and sustainable communities. Responding to the climate change crisis requires doing more than just protecting forested areas in regulated critical areas and buffers. Forests outside of protected areas provide important environmental and economic benefits, such as wildlife habitat and reduction in stormwater flooding. Tree canopy in less natural settings is also important. Trees along streets and in landscaping still capture carbon, increase neighborhood desirability, reduce heat impacts and provide important habitat. Snohomish County needs both the diversity naturally found in forests and the benefits of intentionally planted trees in the urban environment.

A holistic framework for tree canopy is also vital to public health and meets the County's goals for equity. Lower income neighborhoods and neighborhoods adjacent to industrial areas often have less of the tree canopy compared to other neighborhoods. The current tree canopy patterns are the result of government actions, such as segregation and

urban renewal that still impact health and socioeconomic patterns. Local governments are largely responsible for crafting their own policies and programs this had lead to an uneven treatment of a natural resource that covers the region. Adopting these standards can promote design flexibility while still working to preserve ecological value and balance the need for growth and tree retention.

The tree canopy is diminishing. Complete data is hard to find. Although canopy loss may have slowed since Snohomish County adopted its first Growth Management Act Comprehensive Plan (GMACP) in 1996, the rate of loss continues to be alarming. Current policy and regulations may not be accomplishing their intended goals. The environmental, health and safety values provided by a functional regional tree canopy warrant higher protection than currently provided.

The Washington State Legislature first provided guidance for local jurisdictions by adopting the Evergreen Communities Act (ECA) in 2008. In 2021, the legislature substantially revised and updated the ECA which is now Chapter 76.15 RCW. The Evergreen Communities Program found in the ECA includes standards to provide for the conservation and long-term maintenance of the urban tree canopy. The Washington State Department of Commerce provided *A Guide to Community and Urban Forestry Programming*, which seeks to assist jurisdictions across the state manage existing urban forests and plan for improvements. As recognized at the state-level, forests increase ecological, social, and economic value in urban areas.

In the 2024 Update to its GMACP, Snohomish County took the opportunity to consider state guidance by reviewing existing and adopting new policies. Such policies will direct future regulations and administrative rules to ensure the County’s urban tree canopy meets our current and long-term needs.

**Goal NE 12**                      **Provide a healthy urban forest including tree canopy cover to contribute to the economic vitality of the community, increase environmental stability and resiliency, and promote a better quality of life.**

**Objective NE 12.A**        **Snohomish County will seek recognition as an Evergreen Community under the Evergreen Communities Act (Chapter 76.15 RCW).**

**Policy NE 12.A.1**        Snohomish County will identify and pass the necessary ordinances or resolutions and take administrative actions to

satisfy the requirements in RCW 76.15.090 to receive recognition as an Evergreen Community.

- Policy NE 12.A.2      Snohomish County will develop, fund, and maintain an urban forest management program. This program may be solely for the benefit of unincorporated urban areas of Snohomish County, but it may also include in partnerships with cities, tribes, or adjacent counties.
- Policy NE 12.A.3      The urban forest management program should include a vision for a thriving and sustainable urban forest. This program should include a plan that clearly identifies priorities, scope, timing, and resources necessary for achieving this vision.
- Policy NE 12.A.4      The urban forest management program shall help identify, protect, restore, and improve existing vegetation that has significant environmental, wildlife and aesthetic value. Priority will go to locations where such vegetation would not otherwise have protection for being associated with wetlands, stream/wildlife corridors and riparian areas. Protected vegetation may include groves of trees, significant individual trees or tree stands, street trees and community trees, forested hillsides, or similar vegetated areas.
- Policy NE 12.A.5      The department or board responsible for the urban forest management program shall periodically perform a tree canopy assessment and inventory to identify areas for protection and enhancement and report this information to the County Council. Subsequent assessment and inventories should evaluate the success and failures of past actions to refine methodologies and to help identify ways to improve implementation.
- Policy NE 12.A.6      The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources shall address urban forests in the Parks and Recreation Element of the Comprehensive Plan. Urban forests and other forested open space and conservation areas shall be a type or a component of facilities with levels of service standards. Impact fees paid by new development should contribute to maintaining levels of service. Such fees may be part of the funding for the urban forest management program.

**Objective NE 12.B Manage the urban forest resource as a part of overall green infrastructure for maximum community benefit and climate change mitigation.**

Policy NE 12.B.1 Improve the green infrastructure functioning by updating codes and administrative rules to consider the contribution of healthy trees to air and water quality, stormwater management, and other ecosystem services.

Policy NE 12.B.2 Review and update development codes to create incentives to protect natural areas that provide significant functions and values in addition to those areas already protected under critical area regulations.

Policy NE 12.B.3 Control invasive species, which are destructive to forest health, and eradicate them where possible.

**Objective NE 12.C Initiate and promote appropriate urban tree management practices in all urban areas to improve the quality of life.**

Policy NE 12.C.1 Review administrative rules and development standards, adopting changes, where appropriate, to ensure that new development follows appropriate tree management practices. Update these rules and requirements to create more livable conditions by incentivizing trees as visual amenities, providers of environmental services and drivers of economic development.

Policy NE 12.C.2 To help retain stormwater, reduce erosion, buffer water bodies from polluting runoff, and clean the air of airborne pollutants, the County should adopt rules and regulations to ensure protection of understory vegetation.

Policy NE 12.C.3 Departments with responsibility for the urban forest should share standardized maintenance practices to increase overall consistency in tree maintenance, resulting in better tree health and longevity.

**Objective NE 12.D Promote stewardship, community education and partnership opportunities so the public and other potential partners are more likely to invest their energy and resources to help achieve the vision of a thriving urban forest.**

- Policy NE 12.D.1 The urban forest management program should identify ways for people to become involved and plan actions to promote stewardship in support future sustainable tree practices and policies. This should include coordination with the Washington State Department of Natural Resources and others to plan for urban/rural edge forests and their integration into the forest management plan.
- Policy NE 12.D.2 Provide outreach programming that will inspire community partnerships with other local organizations, schools, and agencies, and which will result in greater awareness and understanding of the importance of protecting and caring for community and urban forests.
- Policy NE 12.D.3 Develop community-wide programming to enhance the community's awareness of the value of trees and the urban forest. Encourage engagement in the care and maintenance of trees and related resources by including in the urban forest management program actions and resources to educate and involve the public.
- Policy NE 12.D.4 Leverage programming and public awareness and interest in urban forestry issues to increase wildlife habitat and improve other natural systems.
- Policy NE 12.D.5 Identify policies and programs to improve greenways and stream corridors. Provide for a greater understanding by the public of its individual and combined impacts on natural systems.
- Objective NE 12.E Use incentives as leverage to achieve community and urban forestry goals.**
- Policy NE 12.E.1 The urban forest management program should identify voluntary incentives and incentive-based programs that promote community and urban forestry goals for the broader community involvement.
- Policy NE 12.E.2 County departments should review and revise codes and administrative rules to help achieve urban forestry goals. This may include incentives such as stormwater utility credits, density/building height bonuses, adjusted building setback or parking requirements.



Policy NE 12.E.4      Revise impact fee mitigation strategies to incentivize protection of forested areas outside those areas already protected by critical area regulations. This may include reductions in relevant impact fees in exchange for providing conservation easements or grants protecting land that would not otherwise have protection.

Policy NE 12.E.5      Consider fee in lieu approaches where an applicant that wishes or cannot provide the standard amount of tree canopy required by code could instead make a payment to support acquisition of land or easements protecting urban tree canopy elsewhere.

**Objective NE 12.F      Provide urban forest resources equitably across the community.**

Policy NE 12.F.1      Snohomish County and its partners (e.g., local communities, organizations, etc.) should allocate community and urban forest resources in a manner that recognizes geographic, racial, and social equity.

Policy NE 12.F.2      Access to community and urban forest benefits should be equitable for all residents of a community. All residents within a jurisdiction deserve the benefits of a healthy urban forest.

Policy NE 12.F.3      Identify actions and areas for acquisition in the parks capital improvement program that would help address areas where levels of service imbalances contribute toward inequality.

**Objective NE.12.G      Consider management of urban forests and trees along with planning for transportation and utilities.**

Policy NE 12.G.1      Consider the location and type of trees in proximity to above ground and underground utilities must avoid damage to both the utility's infrastructure as well as to the forest and trees. Review and update administrative rules affecting construction standards to improve both long-term maintenance of utilities and the health of trees planted or protected according to those rules.

Policy NE 12.G.2      Transportation corridors may provide excellent opportunities for tree and shrub planting. County departments shall review codes, administrative design rules and maintenance standards to find



opportunities to enhance vegetation along corridors in County owned facilities.

Policy NE 12.G.3      Departments may seek grant opportunities to fund improvement of vegetation along corridors developed before contemporary standards.