

Managing Our Urban Forest: What do Leaders and Professionals Think and Need?

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Why do some cities manage their urban forests while others seem to ignore them? What elements of urban forest management are most important to cities, and do urban forestry perspectives differ between elected community leaders and natural resource professionals who work for them? These are just a few of the questions being answered by a new research study organized by Oregon State University in cooperation with METRO, the state forestry agencies from Washington and Oregon, and the Intertwine Alliance. These partners have come together to create a regional strategy to advance urban forestry in the Portland-Vancouver Metro area – encompassing two states, four counties, and over 30 cities. The goal of this strategy is to promote the advancement of urban forestry in the Portland, OR and Vancouver, WA metro region, increasing urban tree canopy, fostering regional collaboration around trees, and expanding the management capacity of our urban forest. Now in its second year, this strategy is working to complete a variety of objectives including 1) an ecosystem analysis and needs assessment, 2) stakeholder workshops and forums, and 3) local projects focused on the health of the urban forest as a whole. In addition, this strategy will provide a replicable template for other metropolitan areas looking to advance regional urban forestry efforts as part of the national *Vibrant Cities and Urban Forests* initiative sponsored by the US Forest Service and the Sustainable Urban Forests Coalition.

As part of this strategy, a needs assessment survey was sent to 350 community leaders and urban forestry professionals in the Portland-Vancouver metro region. Based on professional knowledge of the Portland-Vancouver area, it is not well understood why some communities develop urban forestry programs while others in the region do not. Literature suggests that not all community leaders have a clear understanding of urban forestry, and ineffective management by urban forestry practitioners can lead to an improperly managed, stagnant program. Therefore, understanding the barriers and needs to urban forest program management is critical to overcoming these issues and increasing the success of the larger *Regional Urban Forestry Strategy*.

Results of this study indicate that the majority of community leaders and urban forestry professionals believe that urban forestry is important to their jurisdiction, but that fewer are interested in expanding urban forestry projects and programs in their city or county. Difficulty exists in implementing or expanding programs due to inadequate funding and lack of political and public support and tools for community outreach and education. Program items including increased community education and the creation or revision of an urban forest management plan and tree related ordinances were among the most reported priorities of respondents. Additionally, respondents indicated that managing for the overall health and ecosystem services offered by the urban forest are the most important elements of a successful urban forestry program while more traditional program management measures like a tree board or committee, a certified arborist on staff, a tree inventory, and an urban forestry management plan are the least important. These results may imply that while having a healthy, well-maintained urban forest is important to these jurisdictions, many management components that ensure the long-term health, sustainability, and benefits of the urban forest may be missing.

Survey results will serve to inform the development of the *Regional Urban Forestry Strategy*. In addition, this research will add to current survey literature concerning the attitudes of community leaders and urban forestry practitioners on urban forestry related issues using the Portland-Vancouver metropolitan area as a case study. Through this process, the project partners hope to provide a collaborative environment for best management practices, current research, and alternative planning approaches to be shared while advancing urban forestry programs through technical and educational assistance and peer-to-peer discussions. Because the urban forest knows no political boundaries, this research will encourage collaboration across jurisdictional boundaries. By advancing current and future urban forestry efforts in the region, it will help to increase the livability and environmental sustainability of the Portland-Vancouver metropolitan area, helping local jurisdictions achieve successful urban forestry programs that increase the health of our urban forests while reaping the ecosystem benefits trees provide.