

Trees for Seattle Parks



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As landscape architects passionate about access to tree canopy and open space, we were thrilled to work for Seattle Parks and Recreation (SPR) and the non-profit Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks (FSOP) to address dramatic tree loss in Seattle's public parks. We connected perspectives including historic landscapes, site design, tree species selection, mapping, GIS data management, and maintenance systems, and created illustrations and written content for the Trees for Seattle Parks report for public outreach.

to continue this work.

THE ISSUE

Recent years have shown a startling decline of trees in Seattle parks—over the past five years, an average of 700 park trees per year are recorded lost, with loss anticipated to increase with climate change, aging trees, and related shifts in disease and pest vulnerabilities. The purpose of this program is to quickly reach no-net loss of trees in Seattle's parks and then systematically increase the canopy equitably throughout the city's parks.

A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT

A collaboration of SPR and FSOP, this project builds on the vision for the Seattle's Park and Boulevard system. Originally tied to the celebration of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted's 200th birthday, the program underscores a commitment to nature-infused urban public space. Central to the mission is replanting trees to strategically address social, racial, and health disparities. In this way, the program will expand upon early iterations of the park system to more equitably distribute resources for healthy trees throughout the city. In addition to balancing tree canopy at a city-wide scale, the program demands design integrity at the site scale, building on Olmsted design principles.

ENSURING EQUITY

Like many cities, Seattle's tree canopy is inequitably distributed such that neighborhoods with people at higher risk based on racial, social, and health data also have less access to parks with healthy trees. The program counteracts inequity by prioritizing tree planting in areas that need it most, building capacity

Its approach factors in both ecological and human-centered concerns. Specifically, we collaborated with a GIS specialist to create mapping based on a vigorous set of primary criteria that consider the Racial and Social Equity Index for the park and surrounding watershed as well as heat islands, the extent of tree loss, and the use demands of the park based on population density and land use. Prioritization of parks accounts for potential efficiencies in planting and maintaining trees to boost the impact. Factors like stormwater management, wildlife habitat, or use of existing irrigation infrastructure are also considered in site selection.

THE VISION

The Trees for Seattle Parks program aspires to sustain public parks as a respite that equitably benefits the health of individuals and the greater community. The combination of landscape architecture with public policy, community development, ecology, and arboriculture presents a solution-oriented program addressing a pressing, timely issue. Couching the issue in terms of an ideal lifespan of a tree of at least 100-200 years both captures the imagination of what is possible but also ensures that the work is driven by the future survival of our urban canopy. We believe that tree canopy is essential to community health and should be accessible to all. This belief drives the work of the Trees for Seattle Parks program.

As a direct result of this effort to shine a light on this issue, the Seattle Park District allocated \$5.7 million for the program over the next six years and Mayor Bruce Harrell issued an executive order, One Seattle Tree Plan, proposing legislation to improve and grow Seattle's tree canopy while addressing inequities in canopy distributions.

