

## Summary of BES-PP&R Stakeholder Engagement: Summer 2020

Over the summer of 2020, the Bureau of Environmental Services (BES) and the Portland Parks and Recreation (PP&R) co-convened three meetings with community stakeholders to get input on strategies to develop more effective and less duplicative programs related to tree planting and tree management in Portland. The effort built on findings from the Phase One Process Improvement Initiative (see February 2020 report) related to challenges and opportunities to seek program improvements in this area. The importance of gathering additional community input on these issues was prompted in part by feedback from some community members to reconsider the decision to put the BES tree planting program within PP&R.

BES and PP&R worked with Portland State University's Institute for Sustainable Solutions to identify a group of community stakeholders representing different geographies in Portland as well as key partner organizations to serve on this advisory panel. The advisory panel was facilitated by Dr. Jennifer H. Allen chaired by Dr. Vivek Shandas, both faculty at Portland State University faculty. Dr. Shandas also chairs the Urban Forestry Commission. Members from both BES and PP&R participated in all three meetings.

Stakeholders who participated in the sessions included:

- Ashton Simpson, Rosewood Initiative
- Nancy Buley, Friends of Trees
- Derron Coles - Blueprint Foundation
- Ted Labbe, Urban Greenspace Institute / Portland Utility Board
- JR Lilly, East Portland Action Plan Advocate and PP&R Native American Community Advisory Council Member
- Ryan Petteway - OHSU - PSU School of Public Health
- Meryl Redisch, former Urban Forestry Commissioner
- Bob Sallinger, Portland Audubon
- Janice Thompson, The Oregon Citizens' Utility Board
- Bonnie Gee Yosick, Parks Board
- Maiyee Yuan, Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon

### Process Overview and Outcomes

The original intention with the first stakeholder meeting on July 29, 2020 was to provide background on both bureaus' existing tree planting programs and information on the current service levels and business processes. The second stakeholder meeting (August 21, 2020) aimed to offer an opportunity for discussion and feedback regarding long term goals, priorities, and review of options for future tree planting in Portland, and the third meeting (originally scheduled for August 26) was intended to provide an opportunity for panelists to provide final

feedback on recommendations that will be submitted to the Directors and leadership from both bureaus.

However, based on feedback from the advisory panel at the first meeting on July 29, the decision was made to pivot away from an exploration of specific organizational strategies toward a deeper exploration of how these programs could become more community-centered and could better address overall community well-being and existing inequities.

This pivot to recenter the conversation away from bureau operation to values that underscore an effective municipal tree planting program was in response to a number of key imperatives that individuals in the advisory group identified. These included:

- **“Decolonizing” the City’s approaches and addressing systemic racism** by shifting power dynamics and developing a more community-centered approach.
  - By ‘decolonizing city approaches,’ the stakeholders identified differences in power structures – primarily across community groups -- and the extent to which those with greater wealth and access to political power use their privilege to advance specific agendas. Specific attention was brought to the framing of questions and approaches that do not involve community groups directly in decision making, and rather focus on the City’s goals.
- Taking a **collective impact** approach to align city bureaus and partners toward shared goals and clarify roles and responsibilities, with shift to a **community centered approach**. Such an approach should also seek to
  - go beyond city-centric tree planting programs and expanding the consideration of tree planting to consider other community needs that may take precedent.
  - better integrate tree planting and green infrastructure upstream within community planning and development/re-development, transportation infrastructure, etc.
  - better integrate efforts to achieve canopy goals, workforce development goals, and equity goals
  - identify opportunities for ‘sharing power’ with community groups within tree planting programs, and improving processes for procedural equity in determining community needs.
- Developing an overall sustainable strategy for **life cycle management** of trees to ensure that trees receive comprehensive and life-long care. Participants expressed concerns about current City policies that place financial burden on communities for ensuring life cycle management of all public trees, and whether qualifying community members can receive financial assistance for tree maintenance.

Other specific opportunities to better serve the community included developing metrics around tree planting that could better capture outcomes that are reflective of community and partnership values (rather than simply counting the number of trees planted), and identifying and engaging the champions for this work in City leadership.

## **BES-PP&R Commitments**

One of its initial goals of this process was to develop specific organizational strategies for the bureaus programs that would be reviewed by the advisory panel; this goal was not achieved during this process, which was frustrating for some stakeholders.

However, in response to the input from the stakeholders, BES and PP&R shared the following commitments with the group at the final meeting (rescheduled for September 23). These commitments included:

- Improving outcomes for BIPOC Portlanders and low-income, low-canopy neighborhoods.
- Aligning City tree planting programs to integrate outreach/engagement, policy, planning, planting, stewardship efforts, and tree lifecycle management.
- Investing new resources in engagement to ensure tree planting activities match needs and values of the community.
- Making it seamless for community partners to work with the City by clarifying, bureau roles and responsibilities, business processes, funding, etc.
- Setting goals, with community involvement, measuring and reporting progress.

While many of these commitments are also identified in the “Growing a more equitable urban forest: Portland’s City-wide Tree Planting Strategy” (December 2018) that was shared with the advisory group, making a fundamental commitment toward developing an authentically community-centered and community empowerment approach will require significant changes in strategy and deployment.

## **Next Steps**

A number of factors that were identified in the Phase One Process Improvement Report from February 2020 (see attached) will still require attention if any reorganizational strategies are to be successful. In addition to the need to “clearly define roles and responsibilities for managing natural resources to increase efficiency and reduce confusion and conflict” identified in the report, other issues include the following:

- Conflict occurs due to the Bureaus serving in regulator-regulated roles.
- Building trust and healthy working relationships between bureau staff will take time, effort and facilitation – currently, organization structures and cultural and interpersonal challenges are significant and are affecting performance, outcomes and efficiency.
- While shared values exist between both bureaus around the protection and enhancement of the City’s natural resources, common performance criteria need to be agreed upon by both bureaus to determine outcomes related to shared activities. For example:
  - There is not currently an effective process to resolve differences between Subject Matter Expert (SME) opinions and perspectives.

- Set and agreed upon plans, templates or standards have not been sufficient to resolve issues.

Still unclear are the mechanisms through which community engagement efforts will address the suggestions and observations made by the advisory group. City staff expressed an interest in addressing these topics, and have committed to keeping these topics central in their considerations in advancing tree planting programs.

**Conclusion**

BES and PP&R teams are thankful for the community stakeholders' guidance and commitment to improving the city's air quality, public health, and livability by enhancing and maintaining the health of the urban forest. The meetings confirmed that there is a shared recognition that communities of color, low-income, refugee, and immigrant communities are in greater need of trees and services supporting tree planting. In addition, the two bureaus and the community stakeholders agreed that only together can the challenges be overcome, and opportunities be realized at scale to grow a more equitable urban forest.

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