



Tree Equity Handbook

A Practical Guide to Closing the Canopy Gap Between Neighborhoods

ACTIVITY 4.1

→ Policy Inventory and Gap Analysis

Toolkit 4: Create Plans and Policies

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Activity 4.1: Policy Inventory and Gap Analysis

Toolkit 4

Create Plans and Policies

You've collected data, built a coalition, and gathered community input to develop an action plan. Now it's time to begin pulling on the levers of power to create real, measurable change through local policy.

Start by taking a comprehensive inventory of the existing policies, plans and codes that affect trees in your city. Identify what is working and where there are opportunities for improvement. Then begin to craft new policy priorities, assessing your initiatives for potential impacts to the community. Finally, take stock of the strengths that you and your team members bring to the initiative and decide how you will put those skills to work.

Activity Map

Policy Inventory
and Gap Analysis

→ Policy Impact
Assessment

→ Policy Advocacy
Guide

Policy Inventory and Gap Analysis



Overview & Basic Steps

Strong urban forest policies create healthier, more resilient communities, and include equitable outcomes in their objectives. This activity helps you take stock of your community's existing policies and identify gaps or areas for improvement. You can also use the included set of guiding questions to specifically assess existing policies through an equity lens. By the end, you'll have a clearer picture of what's working, what's missing and what can be changed or improved to make Tree Equity a reality for your community.

Suggested Time: 1–2 weeks

Level of Difficulty: Moderate

Participants: 1 leader

Resources: 2–4 individuals with strong knowledge of the community's laws, codes, existing plans and policies

Instructions

- 1 Use the **Policy Inventory and Gap Analysis Worksheet** ([page 6](#)) to identify existing urban forestry policies (and other related policies) and make notes on what they cover.
- 2 Use the guiding questions in the **Equity Assessment for Existing Policy Worksheet** ([page 18](#)) to evaluate current policies through an equity lens and identify opportunities to advance Tree Equity through policy.

After you complete this activity:

- Based on your understanding of an ideal local policy landscape, develop policy actions that align with your existing priorities. Refine your ideas using our framework to forecast potential impacts. → [Activity 4.2](#)
- Consider where the policy language is best deployed, whether through a new initiative or integration into standing documents. Then begin to revise existing policy, draft new policies and strategically include policy within plans and governance. → [Activity 4.2](#)
- Identify your personal and shared team strengths and develop an advocacy plan that leverages those strengths to gain buy-in. → [Activity 4.3](#)

TOOLKIT 4: Create Tree Equity Plans and Policies | Activity 1

Urban Forestry Policy 101

Cities and towns have multiple avenues for implementing, enacting and enforcing rules around urban trees. Policy is typically codified in municipal law, but there are also more informal mechanisms for communicating city agencies' plans and goals. Urban forestry policies and plans concern all types of trees within a city: those on private or public property or somewhere in between, as well as trees to be planted or preserved during development.

Policy (laws) can be codified in:

- Tree protection ordinance
- Landscaping ordinance
- Development ordinance
- Zoning code

Quasi-policy can be adopted in:

- Comprehensive plan
- Urban forest management plan
- Climate action plan
- Open space/green space plan

Types of Trees:

- Public trees
- Public trees adjacent to private property
- Private property trees
- Private property trees during development of land
- Institutional trees such as on museum or university grounds

Where to Locate Existing Policies that Impact the Urban Forest

Policies that negatively and positively impact tree canopy can live in many places! As you work through your policy inventory assessment, the list below helps you locate existing policies to identify the best opportunities to remove harmful language or introduce new language aimed at advancing Tree Equity. If passing an ordinance in your community is challenging, for example, you may have other, more achievable options for implementing policies that protect or expand tree canopy where it can be most beneficial.

- **Local Government Ordinances & Codes:** Tree protection, planting requirements, maintenance responsibilities and removal regulations or lack thereof.
- **Urban Forestry & Green Infrastructure Plans:** City or regional strategies outlining goals for tree canopy, resilience and management.
- **Zoning & Land Use Regulations:** Requirements or lack thereof for tree preservation, landscaping and green space in development projects.
- **State & Federal Forestry Policies:** Relevant laws, funding programs and best practices that influence urban forestry at a broader level.
- **Comprehensive Plans:** Citywide long-range (20 years) master plans that guide urban planning and development.
- **Climate Action & Sustainability Plans:** Policies linking urban forestry to climate resilience and related topics such as heat mitigation and air quality.
- **Stormwater & Watershed Management Plans:** Regulations on tree planting for erosion control, flood reduction and water quality improvement.
- **Street & Public Space Design Guidelines:** Standards for tree placement, species selection and maintenance in rights-of-way and public spaces.
- **Parks & Open Space Master Plans:** Policies on tree planting, maintenance and community engagement in parklands.
- **Utility & Infrastructure Policies:** Guidelines for tree/utility conflicts, such as pruning near utility lines or green infrastructure projects.
- **Community & Neighborhood Plans:** Local initiatives that address Tree Equity, greening efforts and community-driven forestry projects.
- **Covenants, Conditions & Restrictions (CC&Rs):** Rules that dictate how properties within a community can be used.

Assess Tree Equity Policy Gaps and Needs

When assessing your policy and plans, consider: Who benefits from this or that policy? Who might be negatively impacted by these policies? What unintended consequences may arise? What's missing? Use the Equity Assessment for Existing Policy Worksheet ([page 18](#)) as a guide.

TOOLKIT 4: Create Tree Equity Plans and Policies | Activity 1 – WORKSHEET

Policy Inventory and Gap Analysis Worksheet

The goal of this exercise is to identify and assess all the existing policies that may apply to urban forestry in your community. You may need to look in different places to find policy (see **Where to Locate Existing Policy**, [page 5](#)).

As you work through your inventory to identify gaps and needs, you may find it useful to look ahead at the guiding questions in the **Urban Forestry Policy 101** ([page 4](#)) to apply an equity lens.

You’ll probably expand your knowledge as you go. Any points marked as “Unsure” are great opportunities to follow up with local experts and get more information.

Sample Policy Inventory

Does Your City Have Policies That ...	Yes/No/Unsure	Notes & Observations	Describe Gaps/Needs
Assign authority over public trees to a person or department (other than adjacent property owner)?	Yes	Public Works Department	Need to share authority with new forestry dept.
Provide guidance on planting trees on public property?	No	We have witnessed well-meaning CBOs planting on public property but there is no plan for maintenance.	Suggest permitting, access to BMPs, and linking to climate ready species lists.
Provide guidance on removing trees on public property?	Yes	Current ordinance forbids unauthorized removal of public trees but no fine for errant removal or path to collect a fee when removal is authorized.	Opportunity for revenue generation through fines and fees.

See next page for the fillable worksheet



Tree Protection & Care

Does Your City Have Policies That ...	Yes/No/Unsure	Notes & Observations	Describe Gaps/Needs
Assign authority over public trees to a person or department (other than adjacent property owner)?			
Provide guidance on planting trees on public property?			
Provide guidance on removing trees on public property?			
Provide guidance on maintaining trees on public property?			
Assign any authority over trees on private property (e.g. nuisance trees or to prevent spread of invasive species)?			



Tree Protection & Care (Continued)

Does Your City Have Policies That ...	Yes/No/Unsure	Notes & Observations	Describe Gaps/Needs
Establish the position of an arborist, urban forester or equivalent?			
Outline the specific responsibilities of above position(s)?			
Provide guidelines for enforcement of the code?			
Outline standards used for care of trees in the municipality (e.g., lists of species to be planted or avoided, diversity requirements, ISA Tree Risk Assessment Qualification (TRAQ), ANSI A300 Tree Care Standards)?			
Outline the requirements or certifications for contractors working on public trees? If so, what are they?			



Tree Protection & Care (Continued)

Does Your City Have Policies That ...	Yes/No/Unsure	Notes & Observations	Describe Gaps/Needs
Require contractors to register with the city before performing work?			
Prohibit damage or removal of public trees without a permit?			
Prohibit damage or removal of private property trees without a permit?			
Define and outlines an appeal process for enforcement decisions made by a tree authority?			
Outline exceptions to the rules (e.g., emergency removals of trees, trees of a certain size, type of land use)?			



Tree Protection & Care (Continued)

Does Your City Have Policies That ...	Yes/No/Unsure	Notes & Observations	Describe Gaps/Needs
Outline a required inventory and re-inventory period? Periodic canopy assessments?			
Mandate a current urban forest management plan and sections of the plan?			
Outline tree risk assessment protocol?			
Establish a tree board, advisory or advocacy group?			
Establish rules for both public and private tree obstruction, such as view blocking, overgrowth into fences or overhanging trees?			



Tree Protection & Care (Continued)

Does Your City Have Policies That ...	Yes/No/Unsure	Notes & Observations	Describe Gaps/Needs
Establish rules for protecting exceptional trees (i.e., heritage or legacy trees)?			
Outline the government entity's role in public outreach about trees?			
Define species/genus diversity requirements?			
Define a target canopy goal for the community?			
Establish tree planting programs for residents?			



Zoning & Land Development

Does Your City Have Policies or Codes That ...	Yes/No/Unsure	Notes & Observations	Describe Gaps/Needs
Enable land uses that increase green space (e.g. less parking and more landscaping)?			
Prioritize <u>complete street conversion</u> or development?			
Require relocation or replacement of trees removed during construction? If so, what are they?			
Establish a process for preservation of trees to be considered in site plan review for development projects or subdivision?			
Outline requirements for protection of public trees during construction?			



Zoning & Land Development (Continued)

Does Your City Have Policies or Codes That ...	Yes/No/Unsure	Notes & Observations	Describe Gaps/Needs
Outline requirements for protection of private trees during construction?			
Incentivize tree preservation or proactive tree planting and deter tree removal, such as a credit system?			
Establish a tree fund to receive fines or fees-in-lieu for tree removal on private property?			
Establish the authority of the government entity to hold a cash bond, create warranties, or enter contracts for owners' tree-related commitments?			
Establish a process for tree inspection and compliance for owners' tree-related commitments?			



Zoning & Land Development (Continued)

Does Your City Have Policies or Codes That ...	Yes/No/Unsure	Notes & Observations	Describe Gaps/Needs
Establish conservation or open spaces in subdivision requirements? If so, do they include canopy requirements or management prescriptions (e.g., natural areas, groves and stands)?			
Establish rules for trees specific to local building authorities (e.g., housing, school districts)?			
Include different rules for trees based on the type of land use?			
Include zoning code with environmental overlay districts?			



Landscaping

Does Your City Have Policies That ...	Yes/No/Unsure	Notes & Observations	Describe Gaps/Needs
Require a certain amount of trees for new parking lots?			
Establish landscaping buffers that could include trees between different uses or on the perimeter or certain types of land use?			



Programs

Does Your City ...	Yes/No/Unsure	Notes & Observations	Describe Gaps/Needs
Provide incentives for reducing impervious surface?			
Provide incentives for utilizing structural support (e.g., Silva Cells)?			
Have tree planting cost-share programs?			



Plans

Does Your City ...	Yes/No/ Unsure	Notes & Observations	Describe Gaps/Needs
Mention trees in its comprehensive plan?			
Set target canopy goals in its comprehensive plan?			
Identify priority places to preserve or grow tree canopy in its comprehensive plan?			
Address trees in neighborhood management plans?			
Mention trees in open space, parks or green infrastructure plans?			



Plans (Continued)

Does Your City ...	Yes/No/ Unsure	Notes & Observations	Describe Gaps/Needs
Include trees in an emergency management plan?			
Have an invasive species or pests plan?			
Have a plan for recycling/reuse of wood (urban wood utilization)?			



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Julie Cerqueira, executive director, and Claire Jahns, senior advisor, of the U.S. Climate Alliance at American Forests' Learning Lab

Equity Assessment for Existing Policy Worksheet

Use these guiding questions to evaluate your city’s existing urban forestry policies and identify opportunities to advance Tree Equity through new, updated or improved policy.

Urban Forestry Service Impact

Do your city’s policies prioritize equitable tree distribution, protection, preservation and maintenance? Do they remove barriers to equitable tree planting and care? Do they align with climate resilience and public health goals?



What’s in place now?	What elements are missing or underdeveloped?	What could be improved to support Tree Equity?

Policy Development Impact

Who are the main people or groups developing current policies? Were these policies developed through participatory planning or other community involvement?

Who develops policy now?	What elements are missing or underdeveloped?	What could be improved to support Tree Equity?

Policy Community Impact

How might current policies or gaps in policy be positively or negatively affecting equitable outcomes in your community? Are there burdensome requirements for low-income residents or small businesses? Who may be negatively impacted by tree-related responsibilities and risks?

What are the impacts now?	What elements – or missing pieces – are resulting in added burden?	What could be improved to support Tree Equity?



Activity 4.1: Policy Inventory and Gap Analysis

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