



Tree Equity Handbook

A Practical Guide to Closing the Canopy Gap Between Neighborhoods

ACTIVITY 4.2

→ Policy Impact Assessment

Toolkit 4: Create Plans and Policies

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Activity 4.2: Policy Impact Assessment

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 Impact Assessment



Overview & Basic Steps

Now that you've completed a policy inventory, you have a full picture of existing policies that shape the urban forest in your community. You've also identified potential gaps or areas for improvement through a Tree Equity lens. Now it's time to align policy action with community priorities.

Using the provided framework, you'll determine the broader issues you can address through Tree Equity work, assess what needs can be met through policy and planning, and evaluate each policy for its broader effects and its impact on equity. Working through this process will help you determine which policies you want to continue developing to advance a more just and effective urban forest strategy.

Suggested Time: 1 week

Level of Difficulty: Moderate

Participants: 1 leader

Resources: 2–4 individuals with strong knowledge of the laws, code, existing plans and policies

Before starting this activity, you might need:

- A Tree Equity Coalition Roadmap → [Toolkit 2.5](#)
- A Policy Inventory and Gap Analysis → [Activity 4.1](#)

Instructions

- 1** Use the **Align Priorities With Policy Action Worksheet** ([page 5](#)) to develop ideas for how to address priorities through policy solutions.
- 2** Use the **Forecasting Policy Impacts Worksheet** ([page 9](#)) to critically examine potential outcomes of existing or new policy that could help advance urban forestry and Tree Equity in your community.

After you complete this activity:

- Identify your personal and shared team strengths and develop an advocacy plan that leverages those strengths to build momentum and gain buy-in. → [Activity 4.3](#)

Considerations When Setting Priorities

As you set priorities and begin crafting policy ideas, keep the following in mind:

Environmental and Health Disparities

Prioritize actions and initiatives that create positive outcomes in areas with the **greatest need** — neighborhoods with low tree canopy cover, high urban heat, poor air quality and populations vulnerable to environmental stressors. Using data like Tree Equity Score or heat disparity can help target underserved communities and address systemic inequities.

Community Engagement and Support

The success of Tree Equity policies often depends on **community buy-in**. The foundation of any ordinance should be built upon feedback from engaged residents, especially in historically marginalized communities. Make sure their priorities are understood and their concerns and cultural values regarding green space are incorporated into the next steps. This will help you develop policies that are equitable not only in outcomes but also in process.

Funding and Implementation Feasibility

Evaluate what resources — financial, staffing and political — are available or attainable. Prioritize policies that can realistically be implemented and sustained. Consider how you can leverage federal or state grants, create partnerships with nonprofits or incorporate Tree Equity into broader climate and infrastructure initiatives.



Massachusetts State Senator Nick Collins (navy coat) and Representative Liz Miranda (red coat) joined H.E.R.O. Hope Garden founder Judith Foster (red hat) and the team to install a new garden in Dorchester, MA

TOOLKIT 4: Create Tree Equity Plans and Policies | Activity 2 – WORKSHEET 1

Align Priorities With Policy Action Worksheet

First, compile priorities that may have a policy solution. Priorities may come from your Coalition Roadmap ([Activity 2.5](#)) or other places. Then assemble a representative team to brainstorm policy solutions that might be effective, based on the gaps and needs in your Policy Inventory. You will use the Forecasting Policy Impact Worksheet ([page 9](#)) to further refine your proposed policy actions.

Sample Worksheet – Align Priorities With Policy Action

Policy Priority <i>Identify the biggest problems you need to solve for Tree Equity. Review priorities from your Coalition Roadmap or other places.</i>	Policy/Planning Action <i>Within the realm of policy and planning, and based on findings in your Policy Inventory, what can you do?</i>	What are examples? <i>For these common policy actions, we've compiled some great examples of integrating Tree Equity into policy.</i>
Increase tree canopy in low-canopy areas.	Collaborate with frontline communities on setting and implementing neighborhood-level tree canopy goals.	The Oakland Urban Forest Plan 2024 is a great example of centering equity in every step of planning to drive policy, steer operational plans and focus results in communities with the most need. See p. 126 for how they actively reorient “normal” urban forestry program toward equitable outcomes by strategically engaging in collaborative planning.
Reduce canopy loss from illegal tree removals.	Strengthen enforcement of laws and policies affecting both public and privately owned trees.	The Austin, TX Tree Ordinance sets a high standard for tree protection and how best to preserve tree canopy.
Reduce costs and risks associated with storms and trees, especially for neighborhoods with a high percentage of low-income property owners.	Establish cyclical, programmatic maintenance that includes low Tree Equity Score neighborhoods so trees remain healthy and low risk as long as possible.	The Pittsburgh Urban Forest Master Plan explicitly requires the regular maintenance of “all street trees” while conducting community engagement during planning phases.
Reduce the costs for those responsible for maintaining trees on private property.	Establish income-contingent private property programs where public funding is available for low-income property owners to plant or maintain trees, including hazard removal.	Partners in Charlotte, NC have prioritized Tree Equity by providing assistance for tree maintenance and replacement in communities with low Tree Equity scores.
Prevent rapid canopy loss that may occur during development.	Adopt ordinances, policies and regulations to protect existing trees, particularly in areas with limited canopy or undergoing development or urbanization.	One strategy to mitigate canopy loss to development is through policies like the Heritage Trees designation in Washington, D.C. , where several acts provide requirements to mitigate the loss of large trees on private property.

See next page for the fillable worksheet

Align Priorities With Policy Action Worksheet

Fill out one worksheet per conversation. See discussion prompts on the next page for more specific questions and follow-ups that can help guide your discussions.

Policy Priority Identify the biggest problems you need to solve for Tree Equity. Review priorities from your Coalition Roadmap or other places.	Policy/Planning Action Within the realm of policy and planning, and based on findings in your Policy Inventory, what can you do?



Considerations When Evaluating Policy Impact



You've now established a set of policy actions to pursue. Before moving forward, take time to evaluate these actions for their potential impacts — both intended and unintended. This step will prepare you to write more effective policy that achieves your goals.

Policy Goals: Does the problem the policy is trying to solve align or compete with broader community and environmental priorities? How could introducing this policy change outcomes in your community affect other priorities or derail ongoing/planned initiatives?

Unintended Consequences: Could the policy create financial or logistical burdens for certain groups? Does it inadvertently contribute to displacement, increased costs or community conflicts?

Community Impacts: Who benefits from the policy? Who might be left out or harmed? Does it address historical inequities in tree canopy, urban forest maintenance, resources or decision-making?

Feasibility: Are there clear, realistic steps for enforcement and accountability? Does the policy have the necessary funding, staffing and public/political support?

Enforcement & Compliance: How are rules enforced? Is there staff capacity to enforce any new policy? Who bears the costs of non-compliance? Could fines or fees disproportionately impact low-income communities?

Funding Model: How is the policy funded and how does the funding model impact the community and other community priorities?

Common Sticking Points

Navigating Competing Priorities & Scarce Resources: Through trust-building, joint decision-making and adaptive governance, collaborative planning can transform fragmented efforts into a unified, equity-driven policy agenda.

How to unstick:

- Begin by bringing together cross-sector stakeholders — local government, community groups, nonprofits and the private sector — to establish shared goals centered on equitable urban canopy growth.
- Use data (e.g., Tree Equity Score) to prioritize underserved areas and make the case for policy interventions.
- Engage communities early and continuously to ensure transparency and local relevance.
- Pool funding streams, identify co-benefits (e.g., health, climate resilience, workforce development) and use pilot projects to demonstrate impact.

Tree Disservices: Increasing tree canopy can redistribute risks to certain communities, such as increased maintenance costs or damage.

How to unstick:

- Plan and execute effective outreach well before, during and after tree planting and throughout ongoing maintenance activities.
- Ensure adequate maintenance planning and funding.
- Incorporate resources to mitigate potential tree disservices for low-income residents.

Gentrification & Displacement: There may be a perception in your community that increasing tree canopy is associated with causing gentrification (the influx of more affluent residents and businesses to a neighborhood) and displacement of long-term residents and businesses (moving away when the cost of living — including rent and mortgage — becomes too high).

The facts:

- There are studies noting correlations between tree planting and gentrification; however, no causal link has been established. There is no statistical evidence that urban greening causes gentrification. In fact, data shows the inverse — gentrification leads to greening. In other words, greening tends to happen in already gentrifying areas.

How to unstick:

- Plan and execute effective outreach well before, during and after tree planting and throughout ongoing maintenance activities.
- Align your efforts with affordable housing initiatives, more equitable zoning policies and other measures to help mitigate the impacts of gentrification and displacement in a comprehensive way.

Tree Fund: A financial mechanism used by cities or municipalities to support urban forestry initiatives. It is typically funded through fees, fines or contributions from developers, businesses or residents and is used to plant, maintain and protect trees in public spaces.

The facts:

- If fees are too high, they may increase development costs and impact housing affordability.

How to unstick:

- The fund must be structured to ensure benefits flow to the communities that need them most. Policy, participatory planning and transparent governance are needed to ensure funds are used effectively and equitably.



TOOLKIT 4: Create Tree Equity Plans and Policies | Activity 2 – WORKSHEET 2

Forecasting Policy Impacts Worksheet

For each proposed policy or planning action, consider potential impacts — both positive and negative. The guiding questions are designed to help think you through the full range of outcomes that might result from your action.

Next, note possible opportunities to improve results. This might include adjusting your approach to better meet community needs, reducing potential harm, strengthening partnerships or aligning with existing policies or initiatives.

Make multiple copies of the worksheet to evaluate each policy action you would like to pursue.



Policy/Planning Action

Impact Type	Evaluation Question	Potential Impact	Opportunities to Improve Outcomes
Impact on Other Community Priorities	How might the policy fairly balance tree canopy goals with other community priorities, such as the need for affordable housing?		
Economic Impact	Could the policy unintentionally exclude certain communities from economic opportunities or raise housing costs?		

Forecasting Policy Impacts Worksheet (Continued)



Impact Type	Evaluation Question	Potential Impact	Opportunities to Improve Outcomes
<p>Tree Disservices Impact</p>	<p>Could the policy account for risks like maintenance costs, property damage or community burdens tied to increased canopy?</p>		
<p>Community Relations Impact</p>	<p>Could this policy account for conflicts, such as disputes over leaves, roots, overhanging limbs, views or other issues related to tree placement?</p>		
<p>Equitable Impact</p>	<p>Could this policy ensure historically under-canopied communities benefit from new planting efforts, with engagement and workforce development included?</p>		

Continued on next page.

Forecasting Policy Impacts Worksheet (Continued)



Impact Type	Evaluation Question	Potential Impact	Opportunities to Improve Outcomes
Enforcement & Fines	Could this policy ensure fines, fees or enforcement measures do not disproportionately burden low-income communities?		
Gentrification Risks	Could the policy contribute to displacement or rising housing costs? Are there strategies to prevent harm?		
Fee Structures & Benefits	Could fees and funds generated by the policy directly benefit the communities most in need?		

Continued on next page.

Forecasting Policy Impacts Worksheet (Continued)



Impact Type	Evaluation Question	Potential Impact	Opportunities to Improve Outcomes
Impact Over Time	What unintended consequences might arise in 5 years? 10 years? 30 years?		
Feasibility	How feasible is it to implement this policy in our city? Who needs to be on board? Do we have the funding?		
External Limitations	Does this policy account for the implications of the climate crisis, like extreme heat and storms?		

See next page for a sample worksheet

Sample Worksheet – Align Priorities With Policy Action

Policy/Planning Action

Enact a heritage tree ordinance in Arborvale City.

Impact Type	Evaluation Question	Potential Impact	Opportunities to Improve Outcomes
Impact on Other Community Priorities	How might the policy fairly balance tree canopy goals with other community priorities, such as the need for affordable housing?	<p>Positive – a heritage tree ordinance will protect trees and canopy on sites under development and can collect fees for the loss of otherwise non-risky trees removed during development. These resources may then be allocated for canopy growth within communities in urgent need of tree canopy.</p> <p>Negative – some expenses related to tree preservation and fees may reduce revenue for developers.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Zoning overlays that direct investment of heritage tree fees to low Tree Equity Score neighborhoods will ensure resources support equitable outcomes. 2. The same zoning overlays mentioned above may provide heritage tree “credits” for developers focused on affordable housing in priority communities.
Economic Impact	Could the policy unintentionally exclude certain communities from economic opportunities or raise housing costs?	<p>Positive – preserving large trees in neighborhoods results in maximized health, social, ecological and economic tree benefits within those communities.</p> <p>Negative – fees for tree removal on private property may burden individuals on fixed incomes.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Public/private partnership through Treesilience programs can help communities most vulnerable to unexpected tree-related fees. 2. Structured heritage tree fee systems can reduce or eliminate fees for vulnerable property owners. 3. Develop a Tree Fund for fines and donations, a percentage of which is dedicated to an income-contingent tree hazard removal program for private property.
Tree Disservices Impact	Could the policy account for risks like maintenance costs, property damage or community burdens tied to increased canopy?	<p>Positive – the benefits of trees far outweigh the associated risks and expenses related to urban tree canopies.</p> <p>Negative – tree disservices like leaf and debris cleanup risk of property damage, and unclear responsibilities can burden neighborhoods already facing other challenges.</p> <p>Negative – overreliance on native tree species might not be ideal for street trees or projected warmer climates in the region</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Allocating a portion of heritage tree fees to support community-led stewardship groups can help resolve disservices while educating neighbors about less obvious benefits. 2. Prioritizing public tree maintenance with heritage tree revenues will reduce risk and other disservices on public properties through proactive city lead inspection and maintenance.

Develop Policy and Plans

Now that you understand which policies you want to continue developing, it's time to frame them out. First, you'll need to determine whether a plan or ordinance is the best vehicle for action.

City ordinance is the strongest tool to require equitable tree planting initiatives, maintenance and preservation, but building momentum toward systematic public policy changes takes time. Start the work now – the benefits and disservices related to trees in our communities compound over time.

Comprehensive plans, design guidelines and related land use planning tools influence where trees are allowed to grow. These plans are initiated and revised on more regular cycles than policy and may be more quickly influenced in the short term.

Helpful Resources for Drafting Ordinance

Use the free tools below to frame your policy and draft language.

- Chicago Region Tree Initiative Ordinance Builders:
 - [Tree Preservation](#)
 - [Tree Protection](#)
- [ISA's Guidance for Developing and Evaluating Tree Ordinances](#) (2001)
- [Green Infrastructure Center's code assessment tools](#)
- [Sustainable Forestry Initiative Urban and Community Forest Sustainability Standard](#)

Regardless of your strategy, the next activity (4.3) will help your team begin the advocacy process so that you can start making these changes to benefit your community.



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