

DATE: April 18, 2016

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR and MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: THE PLANNING COMMISSION  
THE PARK AND RECREATION COMMISSION  
THE ALEXANDRIA BEAUTIFICATION COMMISSION  
THE ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY COMMISSION

SUBJECT: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION PLAN AND THE  
URBAN FORESTRY MANAGEMENT PLAN

We are writing to request your support for the implementation of goals contained in two documents that you adopted in 2009: the *Environmental Action Plan* (EAP) and the *Urban Forestry Master Plan* (UFMP). The UFMP and EAP are excellent resources that reflect extensive research, expertise, and thoughtful input from the Alexandria citizenry and City staff. We seek to increase the implementation of the goals that they contain, particularly those that address:

- Sustaining and enhancing the City's tree canopy coverage and
- Promoting the use of vegetation that provides the greatest benefits to our environment.

Specifically, we are requesting that City Council establish a work group consisting of members from multiple commissions and an inter-departmental staff team to review, update and recommend steps for implementing a key set of goals, policies, and strategies included in the EAP and UFMP. This work group would provide essential input to, among other things, initiatives on the City's proposed Long Range Work Plan for FY17 and FY18, including "Open Space in New Development" and "Landscape Guidelines Update Implementing Urban Forestry Master Plan." We fully support the City's plans to take up those initiatives, but believe it necessary to first revisit the goals in the UFMP and EAP and to provide alignment with the City's current organizational, budgetary, and environmental needs and conditions.

The Environmental Policy Commission would also use the results of this work group's efforts as input to the update of the EAP, which it expects to be completed in FY17.

## BACKGROUND

The state of the City's trees and other plants in its urban forest is of great importance to the citizens of Alexandria. These unsung heroes often are taken for granted, yet they offer innumerable, cross-cutting benefits:

- Their leaves, bark, and blossoms bring beauty to our streets, parks and public places.
- They provide homes and food for our birds, squirrels, bees, butterflies, and other wildlife.
- Their canopies and roots absorb enormous quantities of rainwater – preventing the creation of stormwater runoff that we would otherwise have to manage.
- Their shade protects us from the sun and reduces the energy required to cool buildings.
- They sequester carbon and remove pollutants from the air and from stormwater.
- They are essential to our lives and our ecosystems, and contribute mightily to our bottom line: our UFMP calculated their value at over \$4 million annually.

Since adoption of the EAP and UFMP, the City's Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities Department (RPCA) has initiated many efforts that improve the extent and health of our trees. Examples include shifting toward a pro-active approach to tree maintenance; initiating an inventory of all trees along City streets and at public facilities; expanding the invasive plant control program; and, thanks to City Council, investing in additional tree care and plantings through a capital improvement program.

Nevertheless, if the City is to achieve the goals in the EAP and UFMP, it will need to address some challenges and obstacles to implementing those two plans. For example:

- A recent three-year baseline study of the City's tree canopy by RPCA's Urban Forestry Section and Planning and Zoning's GIS Division measured Alexandria's tree canopy at 34% (which means that Alexandria falls short of the UFMP goal of 40% by 21,000 oak trees or 104,000 crape myrtles).<sup>1</sup>
- Growth and re-development place extreme pressure on both the health of our trees and the percent of canopy cover.
- The City's *Landscape Guidelines* are important in the review processes for applicants seeking approval of site plans and special use permits. They were last updated in 2007, and do not reflect the recommendations contained in the EAP and UFMP, which were published two years later. Areas in need of revision include deletion of any plants that are known to be environmentally harmful ("invasive") in our area, addition of requirements for care and maintenance during a two- or three-year establishment period for all new plants, an increased emphasis on the use of plants that are native to this area, and a reevaluation of the crown coverage allowances (CCA).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Estimates of tree quantities are based on tree canopy coverage allowances provided in the City's Landscape Guidelines (see next footnote).

<sup>2</sup> Trees and shrubs are assigned to a CCA group based on the typical canopy size of the particular species at maturity in an urban environment. Planning and Zoning uses these allowances to determine the projected canopy cover of a landscape plan submitted for review. However, as City staff has noted, the

- Their implementation is dependent upon cooperation from a wide array of City departments. (Although measurement of our canopy is the responsibility of RPCA, many other departments throughout the City – from Planning and Zoning to General Services to Alexandria City Public Schools -- have roles with major implications for our canopy.)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. City Council establish a nine (9) member work group to review, update, and recommend steps to implement goals and policies of the EAP and UFMP related to the City's tree canopy and plant selection. The proposed charge of this work group is to provide the City Manager with recommendations that would include, but not be limited to:
  - Adjustments to the goals in the EAP and UFMP to reflect City organizational changes and new information made available since 2009.<sup>3</sup>
  - Revisions to make to the City's Landscape Guidelines to align it with the EAP and UFMP goals.
  - Policies, programs, public-private partnerships and future capital and operating budget needs to help implement the EAP and UFMP goals.

Pursuant to City Code Section 2.4.8, the initial term of this temporary work group will be for one year from the date of its initial meeting. If necessary, City Council can extend the term for up to two additional years. It is recommended that the work group be directed to begin its efforts in late spring of calendar year 2016 and complete its recommendations to the City Manager by the end of FY 2017.

2. City Council authorize the City Manager to appoint the nine members of the work group based on the following categories:
  - Two members representing the Environmental Policy Commission
  - One member representing the Park and Recreation Commission

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CCAs are overly optimistic; they over-project the square footage of canopy cover that a tree ultimately will provide. This is particularly problematic in view of the City's desire to achieve a 40% canopy cover: 90% of Alexandria's urban forest is located on private property or property not under direct control of the City (See UFMP), where we continually experience the greatest loss of canopy. Given that we require that site plans under review demonstrate a projected canopy coverage of only 25%, it is very important that we not overestimate the canopy that young trees will ultimately provide.

<sup>3</sup> See Attachment A for a list of the UFMP and EAP components that we recommend be the focus of this effort.

- One member representing the Alexandria Beautification Commission
- One member representing the Planning Commission
- One staff member representing Transportation & Environmental Services
- Two staff member representing RPCA Park Planning and Park Operations
- One staff member representing Planning and Zoning

We thank you for your consideration of this request. If you have questions, please contact Susan Gitlin, Vice Chair, Environmental Policy Commission, at 703-819-8410 or [smcg611@gmail.com](mailto:smcg611@gmail.com).

Sincerely,



Jim Kapsis  
Chair, Environmental Policy Commission

and on behalf of

Jennifer Atkins  
Chair, Park and Recreation Commission

Mary Lyman  
Chair, Planning Commission

Denise Tennant  
Chair, Alexandria Beautification Commission

**ATTACHMENT A:**  
**RECOMMENDED FOCAL AREAS IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION PLAN AND**  
**THE URBAN FORESTRY MASTER PLAN**

**From the EAP, all in Principle 7: Land Use & Open Space, beginning on p.41:**

Targets:

- 1) By 2015, ensure that all plantings on City property are non-invasive and incorporate native plants.
- 2) By 2020, achieve 40% tree canopy coverage.

Goal 3 actions (beginning on p. 44):

- 1) The City will lead by example by utilizing low impact landscape practices where possible, such as perennial and native plant species, rain gardens, reduced fertilizer and pesticide usage, and encouraging the removal of invasive species.
- 2) Set minimum standards for open space and green space in Small Area Plans and other City plans that can be met in part through green roofs, green decks over underground parking, or green surface lots.
- 3) Seek authority to require all new developments, including single family homes, to provide 40% crown coverage on site. Require no less than 40% crown cover when sites are developed or redeveloped, within these parameters:
  - When trees are cleared from a site, increase replacement requirement for removal of large caliper trees.
  - Change crown coverage assumptions in City requirements to reduce the credit allocated for younger, smaller trees.
  - Set a minimum amount of the total crown coverage to be achieved through on-site trees and require payment to Living Landscape Fund for failure to achieve full requirement.
- 4) By 2015, ensure that all plantings by Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Activities Department (RPCA) are non-invasive, flood- and drought-tolerant, 80% perennial plants, and that native plants are used wherever possible.

**From the UFMP:**

Goal: Increase Alexandria's Tree Canopy, and its supporting recommendations, particularly:

Recommendation 1: Adopt American Forests' recommended tree canopy coverage goal of 40% and develop a citywide strategy to meet this goal.

Recommendation 5: Actively seek ways to increase Alexandria's tree canopy on private property.

Recommendation 9: Achieve and maintain a species diversity where no single genus comprises 15% and no single species comprises 5% of the total population.

Goal: Improve stream corridors and other natural areas through urban forest management, and its supporting recommendations, particularly:

Recommendation 28. Encourage the establishment and healthy growth of native tree species through planting and maintenance.

Recommendation 29. Control invasive plant species.

Goal: Strengthen Alexandria's ability to protect and increase its tree canopy as permitted by State and local regulation, and its supporting recommendations:

Recommendation 37. Evaluate, update, and enforce the City's existing rules and regulations.

Recommendation 38. Increase and maximize the amount of tree canopy coverage required for Development Special Use Permits.