

Public Exhibition – Urban Forest Strategy

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Summary

This report recommends that Council approve for public exhibition the draft Urban Forest Strategy. The draft Urban Forest Strategy (the Strategy) sets the directions, targets, and actions for the sustainable management of the urban forest within the City of Sydney.

The Strategy aims to increase the quantity and quality of our urban tree canopy cover to mitigate the effects of urban heat, promote mental and physical health outcomes, and boost resilience. The Strategy outlines how our tree canopy will be managed for the benefit of the entire community and for future generations.

The City's first urban forest strategy was unanimously adopted in February 2013 following adoption of the first Greening Sydney Plan. Council resolved that a comprehensive review be undertaken in 10 years to ensure continuous improvement and alignment with the City's policies and strategic direction. The strategy established a framework for the strategic management of the forest and set ambitious targets to increase canopy cover. Since then we have seen canopy cover increase within streets, parks, and properties, with overall canopy cover increasing from 15.5 per cent in 2008 to 19.8 per cent in 2022.

In July 2021, the Council unanimously adopted the Greening Sydney Strategy, reinforcing its commitment and directions towards a greener future. The recommended new Strategy for public exhibition supports future work on urban forestry. It builds upon the directions for greening specific to the management of the urban forest as a collective of trees and draws from the latest research and new methods of data analysis.

This Strategy expands on the targets for canopy cover within streets, parks and properties introduced in our Greening Sydney Strategy, and builds upon its actions towards a cooler, calmer, and more resilient city.

The Strategy outlines four directions, and nine supporting actions that will ensure a healthy and sustainable forest with benefits for the entire community:

- Direction 1 – An integrated forest.
- Direction 2 – A growing forest.
- Direction 3 – A forest for all.
- Direction 4 – A resilient forest.

The Strategy is to be delivered by the City in partnership with residents, local businesses, landholders, and developers. This will be achieved through services and projects delivered by the City and through collaboration with various other stakeholders.

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

- (A) Council approve for public exhibition the draft Urban Forest Strategy (the Strategy), as shown at Attachment A to the subject report;
- (B) Council note that the Urban Forest Strategy including any recommended changes, will be reported to Council for adoption following the exhibition period; and
- (C) authority be delegated to the Chief Executive Officer to undertake minor editorial amendments for clarity or correction of drafting errors prior to the exhibition of the draft Urban Forest Strategy.

Attachments

Attachment A. Draft Urban Forest Strategy

Background

1. Trees play a vital role in the future of Sydney. They are the largest living things in the urban environment and their environmental, social, cultural and economic benefits are well established and beyond doubt.
2. There is growing research and community recognition of trees as essential green infrastructure. Cities throughout the world are exploring the potential for urban forests to mitigate and manage the risks of climate change. As cost-effective solutions, trees shade and cool our streets, parks and homes. They increase biodiversity, improve our mental and physical health, and enhance economic activity and property values.
3. As Sydney's density increases and the climate changes, increases to tree canopy and more equitable access to its benefits are essential to the liveability and efficient functioning of the city.
4. The Sustainable Sydney 2030-2050 Continuing the Vision strategy commits the City to becoming green, global and connected. In the Sustainable Sydney community survey 77 per cent of respondents want a green city with parks, trees and nature. Of the respondents, 84 per cent want to see more trees in local streets. The Strategy responds to the community's need for more greening across the City.
5. The Greening Sydney Strategy 2020-2030 was adopted by Council in July 2021, and its target is to increase green cover to 40 per cent across the local area, including a minimum of 27 per cent tree canopy by 2050. Implementation and operationalisation of the approved actions in the Greening Sydney Strategy is in progress.
6. This Strategy reports on the progress made over the last 10 years, and reaffirms our target to increase our overall canopy cover to 23 per cent by 2030 and to 27 per cent by 2050 (from the 2008 baseline of 15.5 per cent).
7. This Strategy updates and will supersede the City's urban forest strategy, adopted by Council in February 2013. The key changes/updates from this strategy include:
 - (a) More detailed analysis of land use to confirm the targets for canopy cover and support action towards achieving them.
 - (b) A greater focus on coordination of efforts for the successful integration of trees throughout the landscape, and increased engagement and cooperation with land managers within and surrounding our area.
 - (c) New methods of spatial analysis to help the community understand their access to urban forest benefits and relevant management issues within their local area.
 - (d) A focus on urban forest resilience in the face of a changing climate.

Urban Forest Strategy 2022-2032

8. The Strategy details a vision for an expanding urban forest canopy, distributed equally for the benefit of all, and managed to ensure it remains a sustainable and resilient asset for our communities.

9. The Strategy outlines four directions, and nine supporting actions that will ensure a healthy and sustainable forest:
 - (a) Direction 1 – An integrated forest. To overcome current and future challenges, trees must be considered as essential infrastructure and fully integrated within the urban landscape. This will be achieved through ongoing best practice urban forestry and optimising the connections between various types of infrastructure (grey, blue, and green) through coordinated approaches to design and implementation.
 - (b) Direction 2 – A growing forest. Our target is to achieve a minimum of 23 per cent canopy cover by 2030 and 27 per cent canopy cover by 2050. Reliable methods are used to track gains and losses of canopy cover over time within streets, parks, and properties.
 - (c) Direction 3 – A forest for all. In a just and fair city, it is vital that the benefits of the urban forest be distributed fairly across the city. Spatial analysis at regional and local scales will help prioritise action in areas it is most needed.
 - (d) Direction 4 – A resilient forest. The urban forest can be vulnerable to changes in the environment. The Strategy responds to the risk of climate change through actions that promote a more diverse and resilient urban forest. The sustainable management of the forest will ensure that future generations enjoy its benefits and costs remain relatively consistent over the long term.
10. The Strategy includes a number of actions under each of the strategic directions, designed to collectively drive the targets and outcomes. The City will prioritise new tree planting initiatives on the basis of need and opportunity. We will continue to plant trees wherever it is possible and appropriate to do so. The creation of new planting sites will be prioritised where our communities need them most.
11. The Strategy also includes a new Tree Species List, which outlines the tree species considered to be appropriate for future planting within our local area. The ability of species to adapt and thrive in our predicted future climate were key factors in developing the new list. The list was developed with the assistance of professional arboricultural consultants, academics, landscape architects, an Indigenous consultant and experienced urban forest practitioners. The list will help to promote a more diverse and resilient urban forest through awareness of the wide variety of species suited to the future climate of our local area and the most appropriate site conditions for their establishment and growth. Our aim is that the list will be a valuable resource and reference, to assist in the future selection and planting of trees on public and private land.
12. The Strategy has been developed by City staff, with input from all divisions that have an opportunity to influence urban forest outcomes. The implementation of the Strategy will require a similar collaborative effort from the City and the community.

Key Implications

Strategic Alignment - Sustainable Sydney 2030-2050 Continuing the Vision

13. Sustainable Sydney 2030-2050 Continuing the Vision renews the communities' vision for the sustainable development of the city to 2050. It includes 10 strategic directions to guide the future of the city, as well as 10 targets against which to measure progress. This policy is aligned with the following strategic directions and objectives:
- (a) Direction 2 - A leading environmental performer - the Strategy builds on the existing canopy cover targets (23 per cent by 2030, and 27 per cent by 2050). More detailed analysis within specific land uses will help to monitor progress and drive outcomes. The City is currently on track to meet these targets, with consistent increases in canopy cover within streets, parks, and properties. From 2008 to 2020 canopy cover has increased from 15.5 per cent to 19.8 per cent.
 - (b) Direction 3 - Public places for all - the Strategy will provide improved, attractive and healthier public spaces, increasing the amenity, thermal comfort, providing more opportunities for social interaction and inclusion.
 - (c) Direction 4 - Design excellence and sustainable development - the Strategy aims for a forest that is fully integrated within the urban landscape. The coordinated design of nature-based solutions that prioritise trees and urban canopy cover will optimise the connections between grey, blue and green infrastructure, and promote resilience and benefits for all communities. The dedication of space for tree canopy and community uses improves the amenity, liveability, and health of the city.
 - (d) Direction 5 - A city for walking, cycling and public transport - the Strategy supports this Direction by ensuring the City's network of streets and open spaces are shaded to provide thermal comfort, and support active transport all year round.
 - (e) Direction 6 - An equitable and inclusive city - the Strategy aims to provide the community with equitable access to canopy cover, based on geographic locations and also for future generations.
 - (f) Direction 7 - Resilient and diverse communities - the Strategy supports engagement with the community in the sustainable management of the urban forest throughout all areas. We will engage with our communities to highlight their role as custodians, to inform them of any emerging risks to the forest and involve them in the actions required to mitigate those risks.
 - (g) Direction 8 - A thriving cultural and creative life - trees make for successful public spaces that are visually appealing and encourage the exploration of the city and its diverse cultural, creative and entertainment offerings.
 - (h) Direction 9 - A transformed and innovative economy - the Strategy supports the economy, as research has found that tree canopy results in higher commercial returns, as people spend more time, and money, in green spaces.

- (i) Direction 10 - Housing for all - reviewing how the city prioritises space for vehicles, instead of trees, can make housing more affordable for the 39 per cent of City of Sydney households that are car free. A city with more canopy cover can promote more active transport, enabling more households to become car free, and making them able to redirect around an extra fifth of their income to rent or mortgage repayments.

Organisational Impact

14. In developing the Strategy, consultation was undertaken with relevant City staff. Actions and projects are being proposed in the budgets and business plans of responsible units.
15. Implementing the Strategy will require a multi-disciplinary approach to ensure each portfolio (streets, parks, and properties), delivers their allocated share of the tree canopy targets.
16. The time frame for implementing the majority of the Strategy will largely occur over a 10-year period and be completed by 2032, with many actions required to continue to ensure the ongoing sustainable management of the forest.

Social / Cultural / Community

17. The Strategy will have significant benefits for the community, including providing the significant physical and mental health benefits outlined in the Greening Sydney Strategy. Compelling research proves that:
 - (a) in neighbourhoods with a tree canopy of 30 per cent or more, adults had a lower likelihood of:
 - (i) developing psychological distress (by 31 per cent);
 - (ii) developing diabetes by (31 per cent);
 - (iii) developing cardiovascular disease (by 21 per cent);
 - (iv) developing cardio hypertension (by 21 per cent); and
 - (v) rating their general health as fair or poor over six years (by 33 per cent); and
 - (b) connecting with nature for as little as a couple of hours can reduce blood pressure, lower stress, improve cardiovascular and metabolic health, improve concentration, memory and attentiveness, lift feelings of depression, improve pain thresholds, improve feelings of energy, boost immune systems by increasing the count of the body's natural killer cells, increase anti-cancer protein production and help people lose weight.

Environmental

18. The United Nations describes climate change as the defining issue of our time. In June 2019, the City of Sydney declared that climate change poses a serious risk to the people of Sydney and should be treated as a national emergency. Our city must adapt to the changing climate and increase its resilience to the likely impacts. Heatwaves are Australia's deadliest natural hazard. They now arrive earlier, are hotter, and last longer. Urban temperature extremes can present us with life-or-death situations. Urban heat mitigation through greening can significantly reduce human heat related morbidity and mortality. Research has found that:
- (a) Individual trees can make a valuable difference to air temperatures, by as much as 10°C.
 - (b) At the local scale, temperatures at ground level also vary significantly. One study showed the difference was 10°C cooler in the street that had 30 percent canopy cover, compared to a street with just 10 percent canopy cover.
 - (c) At the precinct scale, groups of trees that combine to provide greater than 40 percent canopy cover at the scale of a city block have been found to reduce local ambient air temperature by more than 1.3°C.
19. The Strategy outlines the opportunities to accelerate our action in the areas of canopy cover and urban forest resilience. These actions help us in cooling local streets, reducing heat absorption, reducing energy needs, improving storm water quality, reducing storm water runoff, reducing dust and air pollution, sequestering carbon, and improving the diversity of the City's urban ecology.

Economic

20. The Strategy will deliver economic benefits to the city. Research in other cities has shown that green urban environments increase property values, improve commercial activity in retail centres and are an attraction for employers to recruit and retain quality staff.
21. Tree canopy cover is the most cost-efficient method of addressing urban heat. As greening also provides a multitude of environmental, social and economic benefits, every dollar invested provides a higher return.

Financial Implications

22. The actions required in this Strategy are largely funded through operational budgets for tree maintenance and management, and capital budgets for tree planting. Sufficient funds are already allocated within the City's approved Long Term Financial Plan (LTFP).

Relevant Legislation

23. Local Government Act 1993.
24. Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979.
25. State Environment Planning Policy (SEPP) Vegetation in Non-Rural Areas 2017.

26. Sydney Local Environmental Plan 2012.
27. Sydney Development Control Plan 2012.

Critical Dates / Time Frames

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|---|-------------------|
| 28. Start of public exhibition | Mid December 2022 |
| 29. End of public exhibition | Early 2023 |
| 30. Final Strategy submitted to Council for endorsement | Mid-2023 |

Options

31. Not proceeding with the Strategy impacts the city in the short, medium and long term. This includes detrimental impacts regarding urban heat mitigation and community health and wellbeing.

Public Consultation

32. Following endorsement by Council, the draft Strategy will be placed on public exhibition for eight weeks.
33. Public exhibition will be undertaken through the Sydney Your Say web page and advertised via the City's communication channels.
34. Notice of the exhibition will be published on the City's website.

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