

City adopts urban forest master plan

New tree-planting blueprint seeks more equitable distribution across Rochester

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The city of Rochester last month officially adopted a new urban forest master plan, memorializing promises in the past two years to expand the tree canopy throughout the city.

Previous versions of the plan, most recently in 2012, were technical policy documents having to do with planting and maintenance schedules as well as pest management practices. They were highly competent plans that drew the admiration of urban foresters elsewhere in the country, but they made no mention of a term that has come to dominate

the field: tree equity.

A 2023 series in the Democrat and Chronicle described the way some parts of the city, particularly the northeast quadrant, have far fewer trees than the greenest areas, mostly in the southeast. That has profound effects on air temperature, human health and home values, among other things.

Mayor Malik Evans adopted tree equity as a major goal of his administration and has made headway on an ambitious plan to increase the city's tree canopy by 6,000 during his first term, including with the help of \$3 million in federal funding.

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City of Rochester Department of Environmental Services, Parks Operations & Forestry crew members Stefan Gassaway, left, and Darien Cotten plant a tree along the 400 block of Blossom Road in Rochester on Nov. 5, 2021.

SHAWN DOWD/DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

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Urban forest

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Most of those trees are being planted in areas that currently lack canopy.

“Trees are considered a resource and an essential component of Rochester’s infrastructure,” the new master plan states. “Equitable tree distribution, or tree equity, is vital to the community to ensure equitable access to the myriad of benefits of which trees provide.”

There are about 67,000 trees on city sidewalks and in its parks and cemeteries, not counting densely wooded areas like Washington Grove. Nearly a third of them are maple trees, with honey locust, oak and linden some of the other most common species.

About 80% of the trees are in fair or good condition, but the proportion of older trees has increased significantly since the last full survey in 2012. That is good from an ecological perspective but can

become costly in terms of maintenance.

There are about 10,000 sites available for new trees to be planted, but many of them are smaller than ideal — about 5 feet in diameter between the sidewalk and street. According to the master plan, the city will “aim to decrease paved widths, in turn providing wider tree lawns and increased growing space for trees to thrive to maturity.”

The master plan was completed with the help of a robust public outreach program, including the hiring of eight community tree ambassadors who held public meetings and led walking tours. The city hopes to continue that ambassador program in some way, according to the master plan, and explore other community partnerships.

The release of the new plan coincides with the creation of a new interactive forestry dashboard on the city’s website, where users can find granular detail on where trees are being planted, trimmed or removed, among other things. Go to bit.ly/3A5WCP2.



Thick foliage shows signs of fall’s arrival in Washington Grove in Rochester on Nov. 1, 2021. SHAWN DOWD/DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE