

Urban Forestry Committee Minutes

September 11, 2025 – 3:00 p.m.

City of Grand Rapids
City Hall – 300 Monroe Ave NW
Room 601

Committee Members Present:

Tommy Allen, Geoff Kempter, Joe Sulak, Annabelle Wilkinson, Nate Henschel, Jonathan Wilson, Becky Pobst, Dan Chase

Others present: Michelle Slykhouse, Nick Hitchcock, Laura Cleypool (City staff), Lee Mueller (Davey Resource Group), Melvin Eledge, Lauren Suidgeest (Downtown Grand Rapids Inc), Commissioner Ysasi, Josh (Documenters)

Mission:

To provide guidance to the City Commission and City staff to promote and maintain a vibrant and healthy urban treescape and canopy for citizens of Grand Rapids.

Agenda:

1. Call to Order: 4:07 pm
2. Determination of Quorum
3. Approval of Agenda
Geoff requested Tour des Trees be added to the agenda. Motion made by Jonathan Wilson, supported by Annabelle Wilkinson, to approve the agenda as amended. Motion carried.
4. Approval of Minutes from the June 12 meeting
Motion made by Jonathan Wilson, supported by Annabelle Wilkinson, to approve the minutes as presented. Motion carried
5. Public Comments – none
6. Presentation on Forestry Operations and Management Plan
Lee stated there has been a lot of attention given to forestry operations since 2007. The City is about to publish a new Forestry Operations and Management Plan (Plan). Lee explained that the planning process for this new Plan included reviewing existing plans and documents from the City, and meetings held with key City staff and partner organizations. The Urban Forestry Committee (UFC) has held a role in providing recommendations to city leadership in order to elevate the work that forestry does. Lee explained that the UFC can continue to provide recommendations, especially now with new data and a new Plan in place.

Lee stated the tree canopy study data is from 2022 and that where there is more dense development there is less tree canopy. Tree canopy change shows gain in the downtown core and decline in some other areas. Joe stated

most of the City is seeing an increase in tree canopy. Lee stated the zoning ordinance targets were set based on the original canopy study and with this new canopy study data it would be a good time for UFC to look at the zoning ordinance again to see whether the changes in canopy are trending in the right direction or any further recommendations for change need to be considered.

Jonathan asked whether any other cities have the same tree canopy percent benchmark. Lee stated when the City's 40% tree canopy goal was established the number came from a national organization's metric. Tommy stated climate change and invasive species need to be kept in mind on tree canopy goal numbers moving forward. Joe stated smaller trees that are planted under utility wires may not do much for canopy coverage percent, but the shade and other environmental benefits are still there.

Lee stated the City has a large percent of Norway Maple and Maple trees. A lot of those trees are now approaching 40-50 years old, and where these trees are located is where forestry is getting a lot of work orders. This is a liability that the City is now dealing with.

Lee stated Grand Rapids has more trees per capita than other peer cities and as far as number of street trees per forestry full time equivalent, Grand Rapids ranks about in the middle – doing more with fewer people. This does not account for contracted work.

Lee stated the storm work challenge is one that will continue and this makes it difficult to keep up with every day or preventive work.

Lee stated priority 2 removals have increased, as there are trees that are making their way onto the list. Same as with the priority 1 pruning list.

Laura explained the issues were addressed that were representing the numbers established in 2016, and the 2024 numbers consist of new trees going into these categories. Commissioner Ysasi stated data from 311 would help when having conversations with colleagues about forestry work.

Lee stated three budget scenarios were looked at when developing the Plan. One is status quo, the other two have more city staff and/or contractor staff added. Initially there is a significant increase needed then the budget tapers off, as the backlog work gets done.

Geoff asked where community engagement comes into play for this Plan. Lee stated the Plan is focused on operations and there is a whole other world with what happens to trees on private property. This is also a good conversation for UFC to have.

Joe stated the Plan will be presented to City Commission and that there are still some things that need to be done, including creating an updated tree inventory. Commissioner Ysasi stated in November there is a mid-year review

and she will bring this topic up at that time as a priority. Commissioner Ysasi stated looking at the trees by ward and area of the city will be good. Hearing from constituents also comes into play when prioritizing work. Bringing the urban forest goals into the city's 175 year celebration may be good to do.

Jonathan asked whether there is a financial analysis for property values and return on investment data for the city. Tommy stated there was a value per tree for properties at one point. Jonathan stated with the City's Climate Action Plan recently approved canopy could impact emissions. Jonathan stated it would be good to keep neighborhoods of focus in mind as the Plan moves forward.

Nate asked whether there could be a new dynamic with Consumers Energy to help with some of the work the City needs to do. For example, working together to identify the trees years ahead of time in order to help shorten the pruning cycle.

Melvin stated he is excited to hear about the maintenance and investment in trees. Downtown Grand Rapids Inc. is focused on planting in the downtown area and will continue planting. However, downtown is a tough area for trees to survive. Anything to enhance the downtown canopy would be great.

7. Old Business

- Tree awareness items

Becky stated Friends of Grand Rapids Parks is getting fall tree care tips ready to be published soon.

Nick stated some seasonal forestry staff watered trees due to the drought over the summer. Nick is still seeing some drought damage to trees and removing some smaller trees that did not survive.

- Mayors' Monarch Pledge

Joe stated the Mayor signed the pledge. There was going to be an event at Lincoln Park in August with John Ball Zoo; however, there were no vendors who registered to attend so the event was cancelled. Tommy will follow up with John Ball Zoo to see when the pledge will be announced to the public.

- Tour des Trees

Geoff stated the event was a success.

8. New Business

- Approved species list

Nick stated he is communicating with neighboring communities and a list may be ready for UFC review in the spring.

9. Partner Reports

- City of Grand Rapids
 - Forestry:

The Martin Luther King Park community center will open February 2026. Canal Park is under construction.

Annabelle stated Fresh Coast Climate Solutions is working on cost estimates for the actions identified in the Climate Action Plan.

- Friends of Grand Rapids Parks
Becky stated a new conservation manager is hired. Fall planting season has started.
- Consumers Energy
Nate stated Consumers Energy is doing a lot of catch up work from storms. Will follow up in December to review the annual workplan with the City and start to discuss possibilities of a more cooperative partnership.

10. Agenda Items for future meeting

- Approved species list (Spring 2026)
- Zoning change and effect on canopy (November 2025)
- 2026 meeting schedule (November 2025)

11. Adjournment – 4:42 pm

Next meeting scheduled for Thursday, October 9, 2025 – 4:00 p.m. at City Hall