



# **Richmond Urban Forestry Commission**

## **2024 Six-Month Report**

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Prepared by the Richmond Urban Forestry Commission as per Richmond  
City Code § 8-544

Photo credit: Reforest Richmond, <https://www.reforestrichmond.org/rtw-2024>



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## Acknowledgements

The development of this report is a collaborative effort that would not be possible without the input of all commission members and supporting staff. Thank you.

## Commission Members

<b>Duron Chavis</b>	3 <sup>rd</sup> District
<b>Whit Clements</b>	4 <sup>th</sup> District
<b>Betsy Coffield</b>	2 <sup>nd</sup> District
<b>Mary Elfner</b>	3 <sup>rd</sup> District
<b>Janine Lester</b>	5 <sup>th</sup> District
<b>Jim Licklider</b>	3 <sup>rd</sup> District
<b>Sophie McGinley</b>	2 <sup>nd</sup> District
<b>Kendra Norrell</b>	7 <sup>th</sup> District
<b>Carlin Tacey</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> District

## Commission Staff

<b>Michael Webb</b>	DPW Urban Forester
<b>Elena Zweerink</b>	DPW Urban Forestry Technician
<b>Daniel Klein</b>	OOS Sustainability Coordinator
<b>Qui Nguyen</b>	DPR Community Forestry Coordinator
<b>David Landsell</b>	Special Assistant to Council Chief of Staff
<b>Amy Robins</b>	5 <sup>th</sup> District Liaison
<b>Sven Philipsen</b>	2 <sup>nd</sup> District liaison
<b>Danielle Smith</b>	City Attorney's Office

## Executive Summary

The Urban Forestry Commission ("Commission") was established pursuant to City Code § 8-544 to improve the City's urban forestry resources through policy development, advice, education, and fundraising. Since its recent reinvigoration, the Commission has worked to establish operational procedures, form subcommittees, and identify focus areas to fulfill its mission of enhancing Richmond's urban tree canopy.

This report, submitted in accordance with the ordinance requirement for a six-month review, outlines the Commission's mission, scope and duties, appointment procedures, and rules of procedure. It also provides initial recommendations for modernizing the Commission and ensuring its continued success.

The Commission has established three working subcommittees—Technical, Budget, and Process—to organize its efforts efficiently. Through these subcommittees and full Commission meetings, we have begun creating the framework for ongoing operations and identifying priority areas for attention.

We have identified several areas for improvement, including measures to address attendance challenges, ensuring representation from all city districts, and enhancing administrative support. The Commission is committed to transparent governance and inclusive decision-making as we work to protect and expand Richmond's urban forest for the benefit of all residents.



Photo credit: Christopher W. Clarke, referenced in RIC Today Richmond Tree Week article by R. Schwartzkopf

## Commission Mission and Guiding Values

The Commission's mission is to improve the City's urban forestry resources through policy development, advice, education, and fundraising as established in City Code § 8-544.

Our work is guided by several core values identified in our initial subcommittee meetings and summarized below:

- *Preservation and Enhancement*: Preserve existing tree canopy to the greatest extent possible while working to expand urban forest resources, particularly in underserved neighborhoods
- *Science-Based Approaches*: Ground recommendations in current arboricultural and ecological best practices
- *Community Driven*: Working closely with community partners to educate and share resources for the betterment of the urban canopy
- *Equity and Environmental Justice*: Invest the most in the neighborhoods that have the least tree coverage, recognizing historical patterns of inequity
- *Climate Resilience*: Consider climate change and urban heat island effects in all recommendations
- *Cross Departmental*: Find connections with other city initiatives, such as the City's Urban Forest Master Plan, the current Zoning Code Refresh and associated Environmental subcommittee, the Richmond 300 Plan, RVAgreen 2050 Plan, Richmond INSIPRE Plan and others to maximize positive impacts.
- *Lasting Contributions*: Ensure the bylaws and procedures established as well as the refined responsibilities and duties of the commission align with City goals and result in better performing landscapes and a healthy, thriving urban canopy

# Summary of Commission Activities and Description of Work to Date

Since its reinvigoration, the Commission has focused on establishing its operational framework, creating subcommittees, and beginning to identify priority areas for attention. The following sections detail this work.

## Election of Officers

The Commission elected a Chair, Vice-Chair, and Secretary as officers. All officers were elected to serve one-year terms. The Technical Subcommittee also elected a Chair.

<b>Sophie McGinley</b>	Chair
<b>Whit Clements</b>	Vice-Chair
<b>Carlin Tacey</b>	Secretary
<b>Jim Licklider</b>	Technical Subcommittee Chair

## Staffing and Creation of Subcommittees

The Commission has established three subcommittees to efficiently organize its work:

1. **Technical Subcommittee:** Focuses on inventory, arboricultural, ecological, and technical aspects of urban forestry as well as education and outreach
2. **Budget Subcommittee:** Examines funding needs and opportunities related to urban forestry initiatives as well as community partnerships
3. **Process Subcommittee:** Works on administrative and procedural matters (specifically focused on the first year of this reinvented Commission)

Each subcommittee is staffed by Commission members with relevant expertise and interests, and meetings are held on a regular basis to advance their respective agendas.

## Operations of Technical Subcommittee

The Technical Subcommittee has met once. This subcommittee is focused on developing:

- Advisory role for Urban Forest Master Plan and inventory collection and maintenance
- Public education, advocacy and partnerships for the urban canopy
- Technical recommendations for tree location, species selection, planting practices, soil management, and maintenance

- Review of current urban forestry practices and recommendations for improvements
- Aligning recommendations with City procedures and resources through existing policy updates, new policy development and procedural recommendations
- Analysis of urban heat island effects and tree canopy distribution
- Recommendations and strategies on best management and stewardship for urban canopy on private land
- Input on city development projects that impact the urban forest

## Operations of Budget Subcommittee

The Budget Subcommittee has met not yet met. This subcommittee aims to work on:

- Analyzing current funding for urban forestry initiatives
- Aligning budget recommendations with community initiatives and partnerships
- Identifying potential grant opportunities and other funding sources
- Developing recommendations for budget priorities
- Creating strategies for public-private partnerships to support urban forestry
- Review of City's Urban Forest Master Plan from a fiscal perspective

## Operations of Process Subcommittee

This subcommittee is specifically focused on the administrative aspects of the first year of this reinvented Commission, including:

- Developing proposed rules of procedure
- Establishing communication protocols
- Identifying opportunities for process improvements
- Developing reports and capturing data on the Commission's activities
- Assisting Urban Forestry in the Commission's website development
- Facilitating branding or marketing for the Commission for public outreach and engagement purposes

## Scope and Duties

As outlined in City Code § 8-544(c), the Commission has the following responsibilities and duties:

- Advise the Director of Public Works regarding rules, regulations, and policies promulgated under the City's Municipal Tree Policy and any revisions thereof
- Recommend to the Council any legislation, plans, policies, and programs complementary to the intent and purpose of the City's Municipal Tree Policy
- Facilitate the development and adoption of a tree maintenance and management plan for City-owned trees
- Assist with public relations and education programs to increase public understanding of urban forestry issues...
- Work with interested private organizations to raise money for projects involving City-owned trees and programs developed by the Department of Public Works
- Prepare and submit an annual report to the Council and make presentations on an annual basis and as requested by the Council
- Ensure the continuation of the Commission's purpose by annually providing a list of qualified candidates for expiring terms...
- Develop and assist with the adoption of a more comprehensive Municipal Tree Policy and present progress reports on its efforts...

The Commission is actively working to fulfill these duties through its subcommittee structure and full Commission meetings, with particular attention to developing a comprehensive approach to urban forestry management in Richmond. As the subcommittees continue to meet and refine the commission's values and priorities, the committee will provide recommendations to update the language in the ordinance for responsibilities and duties to better align.



# Appointment Procedures

In accordance with City Code § 8-544(b), the Commission consists of three non-voting members and nine voting members:

- **Non-voting members:** The City's Urban Forester, a representative from the Office of Sustainability, and a representative from the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Community Facilities, or their designees
- **Voting members:** Three members appointed by the Mayor and six members appointed by the City Council



Photo credit: Capitol Trees  
<https://capitaltrees.org/about-us/>

If any seats to be filled by the Mayor remain unfilled 60 days after a vacancy occurs, the Council may appoint persons to fill such vacancies.

The members of the Commission represent a range of expertise necessary to fulfill the purpose and duties of the Commission. One member is a certified arborist, and one member is a registered certified landscape architect. Except for the certified arborist, all voting members are residents of the City. No voting member is an officer or employee of the City, and no member holds any contract with the City to provide goods or services relating to City-owned trees.

Members serve three-year terms, with initial appointments staggered (three one-year terms, three two-year terms, and three three-year terms) to facilitate continuity of operations. Upon expiration of a term, a member may continue to serve until a successor is appointed.

# Rules of Procedure

The Commission has adopted the following rules of procedure to govern its operations:

## Officer Structure

- Chair, Vice-Chair, and Secretary elected by Commission members for one-year terms
- Chair presides over meetings and serves as primary spokesperson for the Commission
- Vice-Chair serves in the Chair's absence
- Secretary maintains records of proceedings and ensures timely distribution of minutes

## Meeting Procedures

- The Commission follows a modified version of Robert's Rules of Order to conduct business
- Motions require a second and pass by majority vote of members present
- Quorum consists of a majority of voting members
- Monthly regular meetings, alternating between day and evening times to accommodate diverse schedules
- Central location for in-person attendance, with hybrid meeting capability

## Administrative Structure

- Commission utilizes a SharePoint site for document management and information sharing
- Minutes approved at subsequent meetings and made publicly available
- Subcommittees report to the full Commission at regular meetings
- Subcommittees elect a Chair to run the subcommittee meetings

The Commission may revise these procedures as needed to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

## Interest Areas of the Commission

Based on discussions at full Commission meetings and within subcommittees, the Commission has identified several priority interest areas:

### Urban Forest Master Plan Update and Tree Ordinance Modernization

The Commission recognizes that Richmond's existing tree ordinance (1992), which was not codified, requires significant updates to reflect current urban forestry best practices, climate challenges, and community needs. Priority areas include:

- Involvement in the development and review of the next Urban Forest Master Plan
- Innovative and valuable data capture such as an i-Tree assessment
- Comprehensive review of the existing Municipal Tree Policy and other Urban Forestry policies and procedures to identify gaps and outdated provisions
- Research on model forestry and natural resource ordinances from comparable cities
- Development of stronger tree protection standards for both public and private property
- Establishment of tree replacement requirements that ensure no net loss of canopy

### Integration with Richmond 300 and Zoning Updates

The Commission aims to ensure urban forestry considerations are fully integrated into the city's master plan (Richmond 300) and ongoing zoning code updates. Focus areas include:

- Providing expert input on tree-related provisions in the zoning rewrite process
- Advocating for stronger tree conservation requirements in new developments
- Recommending tree canopy coverage goals by neighborhood or planning district
- Supporting green infrastructure integration throughout the city
- Identifying opportunities for tree preservation and planting in redevelopment areas
- Other plans the Commission will follow and intend to inform include:
  - RVA H2O: RVA Clean Water Plan
  - RVAgreen 2050 Climate Equity Action Plan
  - Richmond Connects
  - Vision Zero Action Plan
  - Better Streets Plan
  - Richmond INSPIRE
- **Vulnerable Areas Assessment**

The Commission is committed to addressing inequities in tree canopy distribution and identifying areas of particular vulnerability. The Commission will provide

recommendations and review of the City's Urban Forest Master Plan and procedures to ensure the following are addressed:

- Mapping existing tree canopy in relation to urban heat islands, flood-prone areas, and air quality concerns
- Identifying neighborhoods with insufficient tree coverage, particularly in historically underserved communities
- Developing targeted strategies for increasing tree canopy in high-priority areas
- Analyzing demographic and health data to understand the relationship between tree canopy and community wellbeing
- Creating a prioritization framework for city tree planting initiatives

## Procedural Understanding and Development

To maximize effectiveness, the Commission seeks to thoroughly understand and help improve existing city processes related to urban forestry, including:

- Documenting current city processes for tree management, planting, removal, and maintenance
- Identifying bottlenecks and inefficiencies in existing procedures
- Recommending process improvements to enhance urban forestry outcomes
- Developing clear workflows for Commission involvement in relevant city decisions
- Creating standard operating procedures for the Commission's internal functions

## Public Advocacy and Education

The Commission recognizes the importance of public engagement and advocacy to advance urban forestry goals:

- Identifying key decision points and processes where Commission input will have the greatest impact
- Building partnerships with community organizations to expand reach and impact
- Working with Community Partners to create educational materials about the benefits of urban trees for residents and businesses
- Establishing a communication framework to keep the public informed about urban forestry initiatives
- Initial existing initiatives the Commission will support include:
  - Richmond Tree Week
  - Invasive Species Awareness Week
  - Adopt-A-Tree Program



## Climate Resilience Through Urban Forestry

Recognizing the escalating challenges of climate change and the biodiversity crisis, the Commission will focus on:

- Recommending climate-adapted, diverse species for future plantings
- Developing strategies to maximize trees' role in carbon sequestration, stormwater management, and heat mitigation
- Advocating for increased tree planting as a key climate adaptation strategy
- Monitoring and reporting on the climate resilience benefits of the urban forest

## Public-Private Partnership Development

The Commission aims to expand resources available for the urban canopy by:

- Exploring innovative funding mechanisms for tree planting and maintenance
- Investigating grant opportunities from state, federal, and private sources
- Creating a framework for volunteer engagement in urban forestry initiatives

## Opportunities and Recommendations

Through its initial work, the Commission has identified several opportunities for improvement in its operations and structure. The following recommendations are presented for Council's consideration:

### Attendance Policies

The Commission has experienced challenges with attendance, which has occasionally impacted our ability to achieve quorum and conduct business efficiently. We recommend:

***Formal Attendance Policy:*** Establishing a formal attendance policy that sets clear expectations for Commissioners

***Scheduling Consideration:*** Continuing to vary meeting times between day and evening to accommodate diverse schedules

### District Representation

Currently, the Commission membership does not include representatives from all city districts. To ensure equitable representation and consideration of urban forestry needs throughout the city, we recommend:

***Geographic Distribution Consideration:*** When making appointments, consider geographic distribution to ensure representation from all districts

***District-Specific Outreach:*** Develop outreach strategies for districts currently underrepresented on the Commission

***Liaison System:*** Establish a system where Commissioners serve as liaisons to specific districts, regardless of their residence

### Administrative Support

To enhance the Commission's effectiveness, we recommend:

***Training Resources:*** Providing orientation and ongoing training for Commission members

# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Commission Meetings to Date

September 5, 2024

October 29, 2024

December 16, 2024

February 4, 2025 (*no quorum*)

February 24, 2025

March 18, 2025

## Upcoming Meetings

*April 15, 2025*

*May 20, 2025*

*June 17, 2025*

*July 15, 2025*

*August 19, 2025*

## Appendix 2: Survey Results

An Overall Synopsis:

### Successful Urban Forestry Commission (UFC) & Future Vision

A successful UFC acts as a transparent, respectful, and inclusive liaison between the community and the city, advocating for a healthy urban forest. Key characteristics include:

- **Effective Operations:** Clear structure, regular meetings, diverse membership, and accessible communication.
- **Informed Advice:** Recommendations based on data, city plans, and consideration of trade-offs.
- **Collaboration:** Respectful relationships with members, community, and city staff.
- **Community Focus:** Public education, event promotion, and resource provision.
- **Influence:** Shaping policy and securing funding for urban forestry.
- **Advocacy:** Knowledgeable advocacy for the urban canopy, addressing local challenges.
- **1-Year Goals:** Streamlined operations, a proactive stance on policy, and tangible, action-oriented results.
- **3-Year Goals:** Defined authority, updated ordinances, operational support for the city, and initial canopy improvements in underserved areas.
- **10 year Goals:** demonstrably expanded equity in the Urban Forest, Radical Canopy increase, Streamlined city partnerships, Community Engagement, and representation.

### Opportunities, Assets, Obstacles, and Risks

The UFC has significant opportunities, including leveraging the Richmond 300 Master Plan and updating the Tree Ordinance, and increased funding. Valuable assets include experienced members and partnerships with organizations like Richmond Tree Stewards. However, obstacles include:

- **Mission & Operations:** Scope creep, meeting fatigue, and difficulty navigating existing policies.
- **Engagement & Support:** Balancing diverse input, public pushback, apathy from citizens or commissions, and lack of city official support.
- **Resources:** Inadequate and inconsistent funding that prevents action.
- **Opportunity:** Focus on Tree Ordinance update.
- **Asset:** Partnerships, as well as committee knowledge and expertise.



## Appendix 3: Commissioners and their Terms

<b>Duron Chavis</b>	Mayoral Appointee	5/10/2024	5/9/2025
<b>Whit Clements</b>	Council Appointee	3/11/2024	3/10/2026
<b>Betsy Coffield</b>	Council Appointee	3/11/2024	3/10/2027
<b>Mary Elfner</b>	Council Appointee	3/11/2024	3/10/2026
<b>Janine Lester</b>	Council Appointee	3/11/2024	3/10/2026
<b>Jim Licklider</b>	Mayoral Appointee	5/10/2024	5/22/2025
<b>Sophie McGinley</b>	Mayoral Appointee	5/23/2024	5/22/2025
<b>Kendra Norrell</b>	Council Appointee	3/11/2024	3/10/2027
<b>Carlin Tacey</b>	Council Appointee	3/11/2024	3/10/2027