

Local Governments and Urban and Community Forestry

A selection of facts and resources supported by research

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Overview

Local governments are, in almost all cases, the closest level of government to citizens. In the context of urban forestry, **local government is the level at which zoning, land use, and many other planning decisions** are made. Thus, they maintain great importance in creating and messaging successful urban forestry initiatives across the United States. The following information provides examples of common local government offices that engage in urban forestry, as well as examples of local government initiatives that can be emulated.

Local Governments and Urban Forestry

The following is a general overview of the types of local government departments and agencies usually involved in urban forestry and planning. While there is a significant amount of variation across the country, this guide can provide a brief overview and example for each department and how it can align with urban forestry initiatives.

Planning and Policy

- **Planning departments play a key role in managing land use** across a locality. Often, urban forestry initiatives will need to be incorporated into a locality's comprehensive plan or zoning ordinance or will otherwise be subject to discretionary review by the locality's planning staff. The inclusion of planning departments into urban forestry planning is crucial to the longevity of the efforts.
 - The [San Diego Urban Forestry Program Five Year Plan](#) highlights many of the planning department's responsibilities, including coordinating with other departments, handling administrative aspects of community planning and tree management, and central coordination of the plan.

Resource and Green Space Management

- Many localities designate their **Parks and Recreation department** as the agency that plants, maintains, and removes trees on public property including parks, schools, and streets. Many also contain education programs and agencies that work to help neighborhoods and communities' access and benefit from existing green spaces.
 - [The Austin Urban Forestry Master Plan](#) designates responsibility for much of the planning and implementation of expanding the tree canopy in public places, and ensures that they are tasked with coordinating with community groups.

Public Works and Infrastructure Management

- The public works department of a locality is tasked with the upkeep and maintenance of roads, public property, and trees. They are a **critical partner in many urban forestry initiatives** and possess expertise in tree care and management. In addition to performing preventative maintenance and tree removal, many public works departments contain outreach departments that share information with residents.
 - [Fairfax County, Virginia's Urban Forestry FAQ's](#) provide information about who to call about tree maintenance, planting, and selection.

Sustainability/Urban Forestry Offices

- Many localities, in conjunction with existing departments and agencies, have created separate **urban forestry offices and divisions** to more directly address urban forestry needs and goals. In many cases, these offices are aligned with other specialized departments, such as departments of sustainability or climate resilience. If a locality has a specialized urban forestry office or program, it is the best place to find existing programs or funding.
 - [Chicago's Bureau of Forestry](#) encompasses equity, tree canopy expansion, and coordination with other agencies.

Urban Forestry Plans

Many localities have written and approved **Urban Forestry plans**, which seek to align various agencies across a locality and designate responsibility, set goals, and ensure that urban forestry initiatives are a part of a broader set of policies that the locality wants to implement. The following are just examples of many, including plans from large, medium, and smaller localities to provide insight on how these types of plans can be implemented regardless of locality size.

Major City Plans: The following Urban Forestry management plans from New York City and San Francisco demonstrate how many departments and organizations need to be involved in major localities. While these may seem overwhelming, they **provide great insight into how to effectively align with city departments and other organizations** to achieve urban forestry goals. Many major city plans will often have different strategies for different areas of the city.

- [New York City's Urban Forest Agenda](#)
- [San Francisco Urban Forest Plan](#)

Mid-Size City Plans: While not as massive in scale as major cities, many mid-sized cities also have published urban forestry plans that are very similar in scope, but not scale, as their bigger peers. The following plans for Columbus and Tallahassee demonstrate that regardless of size, significant coordination and imagination is required to achieve urban forestry goals.

- [Columbus Urban Forestry Master Plan](#)
- [Tallahassee Urban Forestry Plan](#)

Small City Plans: Even small cities need a plan! These plans from Harrisonburg, Virginia and Quincy, Massachusetts show the same type of coordination is necessary even with less people and trees.

- [Harrisonburg, VA Urban Forestry Management Master Plan](#)

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