

Date: 6/4/18  
To: Planning and Funding Committee, Urban Forestry Council  
From: Ruth Gravanis  
Re: Agenda Item 6, Preliminary Discussion on setting a tree canopy coverage goal for San Francisco

It's my understanding that Item 6 was placed on the agenda out of a desire to comply with Recommendation 1.1.5 of the Phase One Urban Forest Plan:

**1.1.5 Develop a Citywide Tree Canopy Coverage Goal for San Francisco.** San Francisco's tree canopy is one of the smallest of any major U.S. city (13.7%). The U.S. metropolitan canopy cover average is 33%. While this Plan recommends an increase in street trees, it does not establish a citywide tree canopy coverage goal. As part of the Urban Forest Plan's Phases 2 & 3, a citywide canopy goal should be developed that addresses tree cover comprehensively on streets, parks and private properties. Creation of this goal will require community input, ecological analysis, and an inventory of allowable planting areas. The canopy goal should recognize trees may not be appropriate in all locations and that other forms of vegetation may be more suited to support other policy priorities such as habitat creation, neighborhood character and recreational needs.

I believe that we should first question whether it is useful and meaningful to adopt as a goal a citywide tree canopy coverage expressed as a simple percentage. A measurement of "the amount of land covered by trees when viewed from above" is an arbitrary metric that tells us nothing about how well we are meeting our city's multiple needs for trees.

If the committee does decide that it is somehow beneficial to come up with a target for an overall canopy coverage, it's good to see that the creation of such a goal would require ecological analysis. Unfortunately, by prefacing the recommendation with a comparison of SF's canopy to those of other cities — cities with very different natural conditions — an objective ecological analysis seems unlikely. What if qualified ecologists and other experts determine that SF's current canopy size, or even a smaller one, is appropriate for our climate, hydrology, soil, topography, biota and built environment? Please don't predetermine the outcome of this effort by stating ahead of time that SF's tree canopy is too small. We have no data to support that assumption. The only "reason" given for increasing our canopy size is that some other cities have bigger ones. Aside from the ludicrous sound of such "canopy envy," the coverage comparison ignores the fact that San Francisco is a special place.

If we must make it a contest, why not compete instead for livability, aesthetics, biodiversity, preservation of natural heritage, and pride of place? Are we ashamed to

be different? Can we not accept the fact that our natural environment supports a rich vegetative palette (and hence a diverse abundance of critters) that differs from that of many other places? In creating a strategy for the development of tree-related goals for SF, please do not say or imply that other cities' canopy sizes are relevant to the discussion.

(San Francisco definitely needs more **street trees**, and I think it's fine to compete with other cities for numbers of street trees per mile. But even there, why compare our canopy size to that of places that may have different street and sidewalk widths, building setbacks, underground utilities, overhead wires, etc.?)

I'm pleased that Recommendation 1.1.5 recognizes that "trees may not be appropriate in all locations and that other forms of vegetation may be more suited to support other policy priorities such as habitat creation, neighborhood character and recreational needs." I hope the committee also realizes that in some instances trees may need to be removed to meet those other policy priorities. I also appreciate that trees can be essential to habitat creation, enhancing neighborhood character and increasing recreational enjoyment and quality of life. So I'd much prefer see a discussion of how to go about determining the ideal locations, configurations, densities and species of trees rather than a focus on overall canopy coverage.

I hope the committee's deliberations will incorporate evolving awareness and understanding and will not be bound by recommendations and unsubstantiated assertions in previous documents.

To: Urban Forestry Council

From: [REDACTED]

RE: Agenda item 6

Please use sound science before committing to setting tree canopy goals. Factors like wind, rain, soil type and the ability to help wildlife (biodiversity) should also be considered. An arbitrary percentage based on satellite views of San Francisco's tree canopy isn't a viable reason to add more trees.

Please also consider other options based on San Francisco's natural heritage when planting urban gardens. Historically appropriate native plants can enhance the beauty of a neighborhood, capture carbon and adapt to changes in climate.

Please see some examples from the streets of San Francisco below:







