



City Council

Draft Comprehensive Plan Update Regarding Urban Green Space and Tree Canopy

Agenda Date: 4/17/2014
Agenda Item Number: 4.C
File Number: 14-0362

Type: recommendation **Version:** 1 **Status:** Filed

Title

Draft Comprehensive Plan Update Regarding Urban Green Space and Tree Canopy

Recommended Action

Committee Recommendation:

Not applicable. The Olympia Planning Commission has recommended the December 2013 Draft Comprehensive Plan.

City Manager Recommendation:

Recommend the following revised language in Policy PL7.4 of the Public Hearing Draft Olympia Comprehensive Plan:

PL7.4 Increase ~~the area per capita of~~ urban green space ~~and the tree canopy-to-area ratio~~ within each neighborhood.

Report

Issue:

The Planning Commission and City Manager have presented Council with recommendations on the Comprehensive Plan Update. City Council will hold a public hearing on a draft Comprehensive Plan Update at a date to be determined (most likely in June 2014). Guidance is needed regarding Urban Green Space and Tree Canopy.

Staff Contact:

Stacey Ray, Associate Planner, Community Planning and Development, 360.753.8046

Presenter(s):

Stacey Ray, Associate Planner, Community Planning and Development
Judy Bardin, Olympia Planning Commissioner

Background and Analysis:

At its February 25 work session on the Draft Comprehensive Plan Update recommended by the Olympia Planning Commission, the City Council referred several policy issues to the Land Use and Environment Committee (LUEC) for consideration. LUEC scheduled consideration of Urban Green Space and Tree Canopy for Thursday, April 17, 2014.

Urban Green Space

Approximately one quarter of Olympia is currently set aside as open space, or urban green space. Both the terms ‘open space’ and ‘urban green space’ are used interchangeably to describe land not occupied by buildings, “set aside” so that it is limited in its ability to be developed, and very likely to remain as open space for the foreseeable future.

Examples of green space in the City of Olympia include City-owned and managed parks, environmentally sensitive areas and required buffers, stormwater facilities, required building setbacks, and privately owned open space, such as landscaped areas, tree tracts or village greens. For the purpose of this discussion, however, the focus is largely on green space that is available for public use. This is because research continues to demonstrate that access to urban green space is an important component of a healthy and sustainable community. For additional information, see the attached research references compiled by Mr. Michael Mehaffy, Executive Director of the Sustasis Foundation, and provided by Commissioner Judy Bardin.

During the Planning Commission’s deliberations on the July 2012 Draft of the Comprehensive Plan, Commissioners responded to community input on green space by recommending a new goal and series of policies. (See Attachment 2 for minutes from the Commission’s discussion of the recommended policies). One of the recommended policies specifies that the total area of urban green space in Olympia will be increased per capita:

PL7.4 Increase the area per capita of urban green space and the tree canopy-to-area ratio within each neighborhood.

The intent of this policy is to maintain a specific ratio of urban green space per person, which would require increasing green space as Olympia’s population increases. If the City were to implement this policy, it would need to pursue some combination of the following tools:

- Additional revenue for purchase of city-owned open space;
- Enhanced regulation for requiring open space as an element of new development;
- Increased open space impact fees; or
- Other conservation tools, such as land banks or conservation easements.

For example, there are an estimated 4,000 acres of open space currently set aside within the Olympia city limits. That total includes areas such as City-owned parks, subdivision tree tracts, and preserved environmentally sensitive areas, such as wetlands. At 4,000 acres, the current ratio of open space is approximately 82.5 acres per 1,000 residents.

In twenty years Olympia is projected to add 18,500 new residents within the current City limits, for a population of approximately 67,000. To maintain the existing ratio of open space, the City would need to either purchase or require be set aside an additional 1,528 acres of land.

Urban Forest Tree Canopy

It is an accepted urban forest management best practice to measure tree canopy, and having a tree

canopy goal is an effective way to ensure progress towards a healthy and diverse urban forest. To that end, the Draft Comprehensive Plan recommended by the Planning Commission includes the following policy in the Natural Environment Chapter that addresses tree canopy:

PN3.2 Measure the tree canopy and set a city-wide target for increasing it through tree preservation and planting.

This policy omits a specific target, intending that it will be determined as part of implementing the Comprehensive Plan.

Policy PN3.2 also directs that tree canopy is measured city-wide and not on a smaller neighborhood scale. Ensuring fair and equitable distribution of tree canopy citywide is an important component of good urban forest management; however, specifying implementation on a neighborhood scale, as included in Policy PL7.4, limits flexibility to plant trees where appropriate and use resources efficiently citywide. This is especially true within an urban growth area, where both increasing density and tree canopy need to be thoughtfully planned for in balance with one another.

Staff Recommendation

The staff recommendation is to revise Policy PL7.4 to reflect a desire to increase the total acreage of urban green space that currently exists, but without specifying a target based on population growth. Secondly, staff recommends removing tree canopy language from Policy PL 7.4, because Policy PN3.2 in the Natural Environment Chapter sufficiently addresses expanding the tree canopy. Under this approach, determination of an appropriate tree canopy coverage goal and scale at which to measure progress would be identified in the Comprehensive Plan Implementation Strategy.

Staff recommends Policy PL7.4 be revised as follows:

PL7.4 Increase ~~the area per capita of urban green space and the tree canopy-to-area ratio within each neighborhood.~~

Attachments

See the following attachments and links for additional background information:

- 1) *The Surprisingly High Value of Urban Green Space: Overview of Recent Research* compiled by Michael Mehaffy, Executive Director, Sustasis Foundation
- 2) Olympia Planning Commission draft goal and policies with rationale
- 3) 2010 Parks, Arts and Recreation Plan
- 4) Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (FSEIS) Analysis-Green Space (Staff SEPA Analysis)
- 5) Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (FSEIS) Analysis-Urban Forestry (Staff SEPA Analysis)
- 6) Olympia Planning Commission Special Presentation on Urban Greenspace (December 9, 2013 Regular Olympia Planning Commission Meeting)

Neighborhood/Community Interests (if known):

Public input collected during the Comprehensive Plan Update Focus Meeting Series, held in 2010-

2011, expressed support for the retention and availability of urban green space and expanding tree canopy and led to the identification of the following policy considerations:

- Look for opportunities to create or enhance pocket parks, public plazas and open spaces downtown.
- Develop parks along or adjacent to HDCs to enhance the corridor's attractiveness for new development, and support the long-term quality of these urban corridors, particularly for residents.
- Add to the City's tree inventory as a means of reducing stormwater runoff.
- Allow for temporary-use gardens and open-space in downtown and other high-density, commercially zoned areas.

The Planning Commission also received comments supporting the preservation of large, mature, or historic trees in the urban area. Commenters felt there should be more done to preserve and protect trees, with a subset promoting either encouraging or requiring increased preservation of mature stands of trees to contribute to storm water management.

Other comments supported the necessity of open space, green space, and natural areas in the city. Commenters suggested that open space should include natural elements and be readily accessible to neighborhoods and urban corridors. One commenter also said that open space should be pursued through a variety of means, such as purchasing development rights or establishing conservation easements. All comments emphasized the value of open space for facilitating human engagement with the natural world.

Options:

Receive and discuss information; provide initial guidance on next steps.

Financial Impact:

None; this work item is an element of the Comprehensive Plan Update.