

HENNEPIN COUNTY
MINNESOTA



Community Forestry Strategic Plan

2020 - 2025

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Introduction

Hennepin County has been involved in natural resources protection and management for decades. In 2014, Hennepin County officially assumed the lead role in soil and water conservation services within the county when the duties and authorities of the Hennepin Conservation District (HCD) were transferred to the county.

Hennepin County's Environment and Energy Department became the home for these natural resources services, and the Natural Resources Strategic Plan for 2015 to 2020 was developed to help guide the county in this new role. The plan defined goals and objectives related to protecting and enhancing natural areas, corridors, and green spaces, including a strategy to maintain and increase a healthy tree canopy.

Creating a community forestry program in the Environment and Energy Department was part of the county's expanded role in natural resource conservation. The forestry program focuses on protecting the county's tree canopy to increase the benefits that trees provide. Trees improve air quality by absorbing fine particulate matter and other pollutants and protect water by slowing down and infiltrating stormwater runoff. They also provide shade, reduce the urban heat island effect, lower stress, and increase property values.

Aspects of the county's forestry program includes growing healthy trees, partnering in large-scale planting events, managing threats to the tree canopy, raising awareness about tree pests and disease, educating the public on the benefits of trees, and supporting partners through the Healthy Tree Canopy Grant program.

As the forestry program has grown, the need for greater definition of the program and strategies has become apparent. This Community Forestry Strategic Plan defines program-specific goals and objectives in support of Environment and Energy Department's mission, and the Natural Resource Strategic Plan and Climate Action Plan.

The following sections of this plan describe the current condition of the county's tree canopy, the strategic planning process, the forestry program's vision for the future, and the consensus-built goals and objectives.

Addressing emerald ash borer and increasing a healthy forest

Since the forestry program was established in 2015, Hennepin County has implemented the following initiatives to mitigate the threat of emerald ash borer and increase the health of the community forest:

- Established a gravel bed tree nursery to grow trees that are replanted on Hennepin County property. Growing trees in the gravel bed allows the county to purchase low-cost trees that develop healthy, fibrous root systems over the summer in time for planting projects in the fall.
- Planted 4,200 trees with internal and external partners. Trees were planted throughout Hennepin County on both transportation and facility properties. Additional locations included community properties such as for community fruit tree orchards and plantings in city parks and at schools.
- Diversified the species of trees planted in Hennepin County by growing less common tree species in the gravel bed and establishing tree selection guidelines that are used for county projects and by external partners.
- Protected the tree canopy by conducting regular inspections, maintaining existing trees, and replacing diseased or dying trees at county owned and operated properties.
- Increased public awareness and interest in a healthy tree canopy by holding volunteer planting events, offering training, developing educational materials, and increasing communications through a forestry website, social media, and newsletters.
- Created a GIS map of priority tree planting areas in the county that demonstrates a clear correlation between canopy deficient areas and areas facing greater disparities. This information has been shared with organizations throughout the Twin Cities.
- Increased the capacity of the forestry program to respond to internal and external partner needs by hiring of two full-time foresters and several limited duration specialists and establishing a forestry work crew through a partnership with Hennepin County's Sentencing to Serve (STS) program.
- Established a Health Tree Canopy Grant program to provide funding to external partners to respond to emerald ash borer and maintain and increase the tree canopy. To date, 68 projects totaling about \$933,000 have been awarded in three grant rounds to 31 cities, 14 nonprofits, 12 schools, and 11 affordable housing properties.

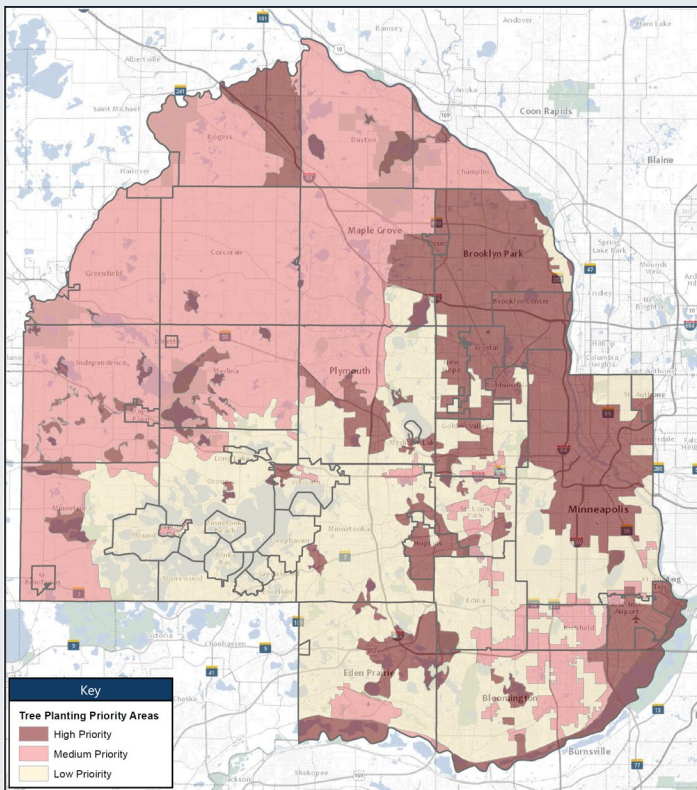
Through these initiatives over the last five years, the Hennepin County forestry program has made progress in protecting and increasing the community forest. However, the continued threat posed by emerald ash borer, demonstrated inequities in the distribution of trees and associated benefits in the county, and increasing demand to respond to climate change make maintaining and increasing the tree canopy even more critical.

The strategic planning process pursued by the county forestry programs helped to identify and define future program needs, key partnerships, and goals to guide upcoming work.

Using aerial imagery and spatial data to identify disparities in the community forest

The tree planting priorities map was developed to identify and prioritize areas in Hennepin County with the greatest need based on both lack of trees and greater disparities. The map analyzes the tree canopy and communities impacted by disparities using 14 different data sets in GIS. The areas in darker red represent higher priority planting locations.

County foresters use the map to prioritize tree planting locations for county projects and to inform the selection of projects that receive Healthy Tree Canopy grants. The tool also helps external partners plan tree plantings with disparities in mind.



GIS layers used in the data analysis process included:

- Current tree canopy cover
- Impervious surfaces
- Urban heat island
- Water and air quality
- Population density, with an emphasis on people under 18 and over 65
- Median income per household
- Poverty
- Unemployment
- Education
- Home rentals
- Asthma hospitalization

Strategic planning and engagement process

This strategic plan was developed using a participatory planning process lead by trained Hennepin County facilitators.

The first step in the process included a series on internal workshops. A multi-department meeting was held to identify and categorize emerging, established, and disappearing forestry trends and associated implications.

Subsequent smaller team meetings accomplished the following:

- Developed a vision for the future of the forestry program, specifically focused on the timeframe selected for the strategic plan.
- Identified potential barriers to accomplishing our vision.
- Determined potential strategies and actions to address the barriers.
- Drafted specific and realistic goals and steps to remove barriers and meet our vision.

The next steps of the strategic planning process were to gather feedback from external forestry partners on our draft goals and strategies and then to incorporate key insights into the final plan.



Gathering public and partner feedback

Hennepin County foresters hosted a meeting to gather feedback from partner organizations in February 2020. The meeting had 40 participants representing forestry and public works programs in Hennepin County cities, past recipients of Healthy Tree Canopy grants, state and regional governmental agencies involved in natural resource management, the University of Minnesota, and local nonprofits involved in green space management and education.

Insights were gathered from participants on tree canopy cover, tree planting and maintenance, outreach and engagement, data usage and needs, priorities and challenges, and disparity reduction. During small, facilitated group discussions, participants shared their perspective on these topics with respect to their organization's status, priorities, and challenges in caring for the community forest.

The valuable insights shared by partners helped shape this strategic plan. Review and synthesis of the feedback identified the following key findings:

- City programs vary widely in maturity, resources, support, and interest in or ability to try innovative programs or approaches.
- Tree maintenance of both mature trees and newly planted replacements is costly and a major concern.
- Access to a variety of less commonly planted species is limited and costly.
- There are gaps in tree canopy data, especially at a regional level and on private property.
- The support provided by Hennepin County in the past few years has been valuable to partners.
- There is interest in further collaboration among the partners who attended the feedback session.
- The amount of ash trees on private property and anticipated future canopy loss from emerald ash borer are a major concern.
- There is a variable level of interest, awareness, and knowledge about trees – both with the public and within these organizations.



Representatives from the following partners organizations attended the feedback session:

- Bloomington
- Brooklyn Center
- Brooklyn Park
- Eden Prairie
- Edina
- Golden Valley
- Hopkins
- Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board
- Minneapolis
- Minnetonka
- Osseo
- Richfield
- Robbinsdale
- St. Anthony Village
- St. Louis Park
- Tonka Bay
- Minnesota Department of Natural Resources
- Mississippi Park Connection
- Three Rivers Park District
- Tree Trust
- Twin Cities Habitat for Humanity
- University of Minnesota
- U.S. Forest Service
- YMCA

Forestry strategic vision

As a program working within the Hennepin County Environment and Energy Department, the forestry program works to support the department's mission:

To protect and preserve the environment to enhance the quality of life for current and future generations through the responsible management of natural resources, development of effective partnerships and promotion of environmental stewardship.

The forestry program also works in tandem with other programs in the Environment and Energy Department to implement the Natural Resources Strategic Plan, including the specific strategy of maintaining and increasing a healthy tree canopy. In pursuit of this strategy and the department's mission, the following vision was developed that will define success of the forestry strategic plan.

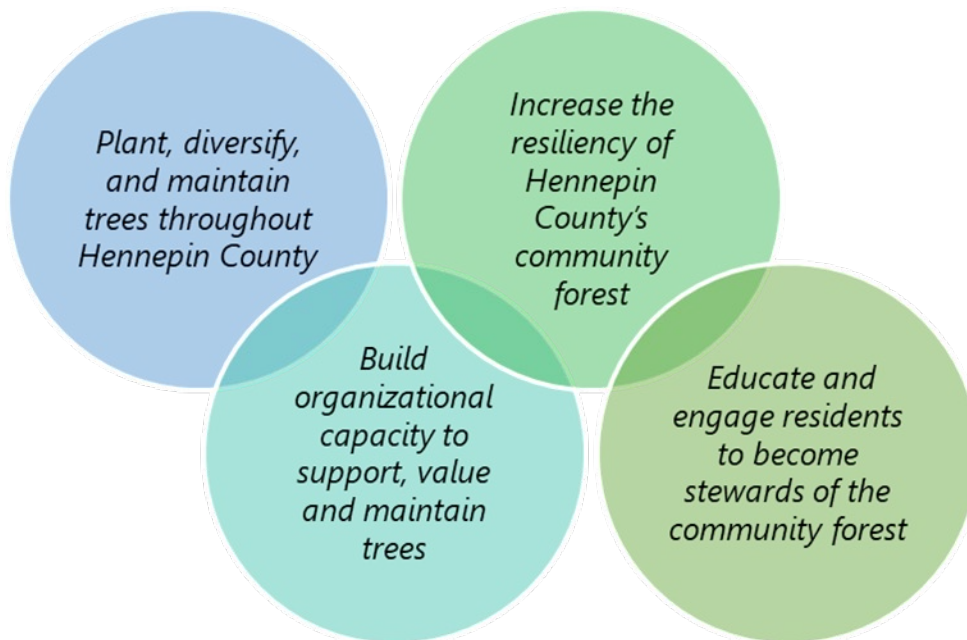
In the next five years, we hope to see the following take place as a result of our actions:

- Stronger partnerships exist across internal lines of business and with external partners
- More people value and care for trees
- Best management practices that incorporate evolving research are utilized
- Forestry policies are established and implemented
- Communities are better prepared for current and future threats to the tree canopy
- Success stories are shared routinely and effectively
- Trees are used as a tool for reducing disparities and for responding to climate change

Goals, objectives, and strategies

This strategic plan accounts for both new and ongoing strategies the county will pursue to meet our identified goals. The plan proposes an adaptive management approach in which we will continually review management strategies and outcomes in order to help fulfil the Environment and Energy Department's mission and the forestry program vision.

The objectives and strategies are designed to meet the following overarching goals of the forestry program:



Goal 1: Plant, diversify, and maintain trees throughout Hennepin County

Hennepin County is dedicated to maintaining existing trees, planting new trees, and supporting the work of partners to enhance the community forest. In the past, trees planted were relatively homogeneous, and entire streets were planted with the same species. This overreliance on a few tree species has made the community forest more susceptible to significant canopy loss from pests, diseases, and changes in climate.

Increasing the diversity of trees planted and maintaining the existing tree canopy will ensure that communities continue to enjoy the benefits that trees provide into the future while avoiding catastrophic canopy losses. Community forests can be used as a tool to adapt to climate change by providing shade to reduce the urban heat island and mitigating stormwater during more frequent and intense rain events. Trees also mitigate the effects of greenhouse gas emissions by sequestering carbon.

In order to maintain these benefits, Hennepin County must continue to expand planting operations, experiment with trees found in more southern growing ranges, use new and existing technologies, and share our experiences with partners. Testing the efficacy of climactic adaptive species will be done in urban settings, and trees will be carefully monitored to ensure they do not become invasive species.

Objective 1.1: Plant more trees on Hennepin County properties

Strategies:

- Achieve a goal of no net loss of trees on Hennepin County property through tree replacements on site or nearby to mitigate the environmental and aesthetic consequences of tree removals in construction projects.
- Create and implement tree planting plans that focus on tree species diversity. At a minimum, adhere to the 10-20-30 rule, which specifies that no more than 10% of the tree canopy comes from one species, no more than 20% comes from one genus, and no more than 30% comes from one family. This will mitigate future catastrophic losses such as those experienced from Dutch elm disease and emerald ash borer.
- Use the tree planting prioritization map to determine where the greatest need for trees is and work with other Hennepin County departments on projects to address disparities.
- Order trees for specific locations and planting projects. Determine tree needs during the planning and design phase of projects to incorporate gravel bed trees.
- Quantify potential benefits of trees in planting plans. Track metrics and share information with relevant partners.
- Maintain newly planted trees with the STS forestry crew for a two-year establishment period. Ensure that the trees planted are being properly cared for during the establishment period, and work with internal partners to determine long-term maintenance agreements.

Objective 1.2: Enhance gravel bed nursery operations

Strategies:

- Improve the gravel bed nursery to increase tree health and fibrous root growth by installing a paved base for the gravel bed and reconfiguring operations for greater, long-term efficiency.

- Increase quantity and diversity of trees being grown by seed at the gravel bed nursery. Seeds are collected around the region from under-planted species or more southern species that have survived local conditions. Distribute these trees in seedling giveaway events, during Arbor Day celebrations, and on conservation easements.

Objective 1.3: Expand programing to increase tree canopy cover

Strategies:

- Partner to supply trees for volunteer plantings on public property. Using volunteers can increase community engagement and awareness and ultimately increase stewardship for the community forest.
- Partner with cities or other external organizations to procure under-planted tree species at a bulk discount. Climate adaptive or underrepresented tree species are often difficult to find at nurseries, and Hennepin County can help cities source and diversify trees being planted by aggregating orders.
- Develop a pilot program to plant trees on private property. The majority of tree canopy cover is located on private property throughout Hennepin County. With the anticipated high loss of ash trees on private property due to emerald ash borer and impending pressures from climate change, partnering with private property owners can have a significant impact on replenishing the canopy for future generations and help to reduce disparities.

Goal 2: Increase the resiliency of Hennepin County's community forest

Trees are an important long-term asset that provide valuable benefits to a community. These include mitigating stormwater and reducing the urban heat island, improving the aesthetics of neighborhoods, and positively impacting mental health.

Challenges to maintaining the existing community forest include tree loss from pests and disease that impact the limited tree species historically planted and development projects that remove large and mature trees. Hennepin County and our community partners must continue to expand our understanding of the existing trees through inventories and assessments so that we may protect this asset and expand it when possible.

Objective 2.1: Provide more robust data and information to help with tree management efforts, planning, and prioritization

Strategies:

- Continue to improve data collection and analysis, including refining a tree canopy cover assessment. Tree canopy cover can be used as a tool to understand where to prioritize future tree plantings. Provide relevant data and information to partners to help their forestry efforts.
- Refine and use the tree planting prioritization map in internal and external projects. This map highlights priority tree planting locations based on environmental and demographic information.

- Assist with community-led tree inventories. Tree inventories are the first step for organizations to understand their current canopy and to inform development of canopy management strategies. In particular, it is important for communities to understand ash tree locations to help prioritize emerald ash borer management strategies and to develop strategies to diversify their canopy.
- Encourage partner organizations to use Hennepin County's tree inventory mobile application. Hennepin County created a free application that allows any entity within the county to collect and store tree inventory data. This resource can help smaller cities and organizations better understand their tree resources and reduce the overall cost when funding is limited.
- Monitor newly planted trees. Since 2017, the Hennepin County forestry program has collected growth rate data on a sample set of newly planted trees. Annual monitoring data can compare growth rates between gravel bed, balled and burlapped, and containerized trees. Additionally, growth rates can be compared between facility locations and plantings along county roads.
- Collect soil samples annually. Since 2018, the Hennepin County forestry program has collected composite soil samples from 10 sites across the county to test for soil salinity from road salt. Over time, this data will provide insights into how road deicing salt is affecting soil conditions.

Objective 2.2: Implement emerald ash borer preparedness actions

Strategies:

- Update the Hennepin County tree canopy enhancement and emerald ash borer management plan. The 2016 plan has guided ash tree management on Hennepin County properties. Strategies should be reviewed and updated to address current conditions and needs.
- Continue to protect select ash trees on Hennepin County properties from emerald ash borer with pesticide treatments. In 2019, 64 mature ash trees were treated at Hennepin County facilities to preserve the benefits that large trees provide. These trees need to be treated every three years to continue being protected from emerald ash borer.
- Assist cities with management of ash trees. Hennepin County cities are becoming increasingly overwhelmed with the number of ash trees infested with emerald ash borer that require treatment or removal. Hennepin County is an agency that can coordinate across city lines to help ease this burden and ensure efficient use of resources.
- Promote the emerald ash borer website and implement communication initiatives to increase emerald ash borer preparedness. Since most of the ash trees in the county are located on private property, the decisions that residents make about the future of their trees impacts the overall community tree canopy and associated benefits. Resident education helps increase awareness of ash tree identification, management strategies, and replanting options.
- Use lessons learned and management strategies developed to address emerald ash borer to prepare for and manage future invasive tree pests and diseases. Other areas of the United States are experiencing destructive forest pests including the Asian longhorn beetle and spotted lanternfly. Planting a diversity of tree species and continuing to inventory trees can help protect community forests from future pests and diseases.

- Continue lobbying efforts to increase state funding for emerald ash borer management and replanting efforts. Funding for management of emerald ash borer has been severely lacking for communities throughout Minnesota. Annual lobbying efforts can seek to secure funding for communities in Hennepin County as well as throughout greater Minnesota.

Objective 2.3: Continue the Healthy Tree Canopy Grant Program

Strategies:

- Increase the number of organizations participating in the grant program. Continue to spread the word about how the tree-related projects funded by the grants are helping communities and organizations increase reach and provide tree canopy cover for future generations.
- Conduct targeted outreach to entities located in high priority areas identified on the tree planting prioritization map. Tree planting and ash tree management in historically underrepresented areas, which closely correlate with canopy deficient areas, can provide environmental benefits that also mitigate the effects of climate change on communities. In concert with many other strategies, enhancing the tree canopy can help reduce health disparities by improving air quality and reducing the urban heat island.

Objective 2.4: Protect and increase trees on Hennepin County property

Strategies:

- Create an official Hennepin County tree preservation policy, which would establish guidelines for development and construction projects to identify existing trees that are valuable and worth protecting. Projects unable to preserve those valuable trees would implement mitigation efforts to lessen the overall impact to the tree canopy. Under the policy, a tree preservation plan would be part of initial planning efforts and meetings for county construction projects.
- Integrate tree canopy goals and strategies into existing Hennepin County policies and guidelines. The streetscape guidelines, which outline what cities can and cannot do along county roads, were recently revised to clarify regulations about streetscape vegetation. The guidelines should continue to be improved to balance aesthetics and roadside requirements. Additionally, the complete streets policy should integrate landscaping into roadside uses to create a holistic approach to street design.
- Institutionalize a tree-forward approach to designing road projects. This approach would include reducing the number of trees removed along county roads during reconstruction projects and ensuring that tree removals include mitigation efforts to ultimately increase tree canopy cover where appropriate.

Goal 3: Build organizational capacity to support, value, and maintain trees

Hennepin County strives to improve county services through proactive, innovative community engagement. Support from many county departments and lines of business along with political and financial support is required in order to maintain and increase the benefits that our community forest provides. Communication and collaboration are key to creating initiatives that positively impacts residents and the community forest.

Objective 3.1: Foster partnerships across Hennepin County lines of business

Strategies:

- Work with Facilities Services to be included in the initial phases of building reconstruction projects. Hennepin County foresters can provide design assistance, design and planning feedback, and installation of trees for these types of projects.
- Work with Transportation to be included in the initial design of reconstruction projects. Coordinate with project engineers to inventory trees that will be impacted by the project, design tree planting plans, and install and maintain trees. It is important to be involved early in the design process to determine the proper placement for new trees, protect existing trees, and provide tree-related project assistance.
- Work with Resident and Real Estate Services to remove poor quality, volunteer trees and plant gravel bed trees at rehabilitated housing sites. Using the STS forestry crew to complete this work will reduce overall costs.
- Establish pruning schedules for young trees planted on Hennepin County properties. Ensuring successful establishment of young trees and pruning for a healthy tree structure are key to the long-term health and success of the community forest. Newly planted trees should be pruned at least twice within the first five years after planting.
- Incorporate tree planting and protection specifications in county projects. This will ensure that trees are properly planted and have a higher survival rate. Additionally, the existing tree canopy can be preserved by ensuring proper tree protection measures are integrated into the initial phases of a project.

Objective 3.2: Protect mature trees

Strategies:

- Partner with Facility Services to schedule and implement a routine mature tree pruning effort. This work should take place every four to five years to improve the health of existing trees.
- Ensure that all facility and transportation construction projects have appropriate tree protection measures included to preserve mature trees.
- Continue to inventory diseased trees along county roads annually and provide this data to Transportation Asset Management. Transportation Operations removes the diseased trees during the winter. The inventory is performed to document and prevent the spread of Dutch Elm disease and Oak wilt. This reduces hazards along county roads and protects trees directly adjacent to the roadside.
- Support workforce development initiatives to maintain facilities. STS and the Department of Community Corrections have been exploring the creation of a program to help probationers enter the tree care industry. Hennepin County properties could be training sites for this program. Work could include mature tree pruning, tree removals, tree plantings, and tree care.

Objective 3.3: Share success stories

Strategies:

- Develop an annual forestry report to share metrics, document work completed and accomplishments, and highlight success stories. The annual report will be shared with leadership and partners.
- Share project examples and success stories with other departments and the public via the canopy newsletter, social media, website, and various guidance and outreach documents.

Objective 3.4: Maintain effective program capacity

Strategies:

- Ensure forestry staffing levels are adequate to continue to grow the program. As emerald ash borer continues to spread throughout Hennepin County, more organizations will look to the county and state for assistance. Staffing levels are critical to continue to support partners, expand community forestry programs, and maintain tree planting projects.
- Prioritize workforce development and continuous improvement among staff. Staff should continue to build on their existing knowledge and attend trainings and workshops to increase their technical expertise.
- Continue to maintain and expand staff relationships with external community partners and internal Hennepin County partners.
- Encourage tree-related funding in Transportation Operations and Facility Services budgets to maintain existing trees, remove hazardous trees, and establish newly planted trees. Proactive removals of ash trees will save money in the long-term by removing trees before they become hazardous and more expensive to manage. Additionally, financial investments in newly planted trees will increase their health and survival rates.
- Identify and implement tree care and watering support of newly planted trees.

Goal 4: Educate and engage residents to become stewards of the community forest

Educating and involving residents is an important part of protecting the community forest. Sharing tree-related knowledge and insights into the benefits that trees provide is valuable in fostering environmental stewardship and ensuring a more robust community forest. Engaging residents in tree planting, maintenance, and protection can improve long-term survival rates. Educating residents can also dispel inaccurate pre-conceived notions about trees and involving residents in tree-related projects can increase their sense of ownership for their community forest.

Furthermore, keeping recurring volunteers, such as participants in the Tree Steward Program, engaged is important. This can be achieved by providing a variety of volunteer and leadership opportunities such as tree plantings, pruning workshops, tree monitoring, and conducting outreach at events.

Objective 4.1: Educate and engage volunteers

Strategies:

- Continue to expand the Tree Stewards Program by working with additional communities to recruit new volunteers.
- Provide tree planting and maintenance events to engage existing Tree Stewards and other volunteers.
- Acknowledge contributions of volunteers and partners. Volunteers are incredibly important and increase our capacity to improve the community forest.

Objective 4.2: Educate and engage youth

Strategies:

- Assist in the development of forestry education programming in schools. Youth are critical advocates to engage in protecting and enhancing the community forest. From understanding how to identify trees at their school or home, to getting their hands dirty with planting trees, there are many ways to engage youth. Greater outreach to school-age youth also will promote greater interest in careers in forestry and natural resource protection.
- Train teachers in Project Learning Tree (PLT) curriculum. PLT is an environmental education program targeting teachers and other educators working with youth grades K through 12. Training teachers can effectively increase the reach of PLT and improve education about the community forest.

Objective 4.3: Educate and engage residents

Strategies

- Celebrate Arbor Day through public events and social media. Arbor Day signifies the start of tree planting season, and it's a great way to engage the community in celebrating the importance of trees and recognizing the benefits that trees provide. Arbor Day celebrations could include giving away seedlings to residents to plant in their own yards, attending community celebrations to provide tree-related education, and holding tree planting events with different communities.
- Create and distribute Canopy newsletter to residents and other external partners. The Canopy newsletter is a quarterly, online publication that includes updates about opportunities for community organizations and education about tree care.



Hennepin County Tree Stewards

In partnership with the University of Minnesota, the Tree Stewards program provides residents comprehensive tree-related education, including in tree biology, care and maintenance, and opportunities to get involved in the community through tree planting, monitoring, and outreach.

Valuable contributions of Tree Stewards including monitoring and caring for trees, educating residents at community events, advocating for sound forestry practices, taking a leadership role at planting events, and increasing the capacity of city forestry programs.

- Educate residents about emerald ash borer and raise awareness about management options. As emerald ash borer continues to spread throughout Hennepin County, it is important that landowners have enough information to make educated management decisions for ash trees on their properties. Working with cities and other partners to get information out to the public is key to encouraging proactive management and reducing hazards from dying ash trees.

Objective 4.4: Foster effective partnerships

Strategies:

- Identify new partnerships with cities and organizations and continue to grow and foster existing relationships. Partners are critical to increasing our reach and expanding our ability to do meaningful work.
- Explore public-private partnerships and identify creative funding sources. Private-public partnerships can be facilitated through ongoing efforts such as carbon credits or on a project-by-project basis.

Conclusion

Together, the strategies outlined in this plan will build stronger internal and external partnerships, get more people involved in caring for trees, increase awareness of the values of trees, establish effective forestry policies, better prepare communities for current and future threats to trees, ensure trees are used to reduce disparities and respond to climate change, and capture success stories that inspire further action.

Pursuing all these strategies over the next five years will create a healthier and more resilient community forest and ensure more equitable opportunities for communities to experience the benefits that trees provide.

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