

Growing need is seen for big trees

'Greenprint' program hopes to double the area's shade canopy.

By Jim Downing -- Bee Staff Writer

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The capital region is expected to have 4 million residents by midcentury.

The Sacramento Tree Foundation wants all those people - and their parking lots, houses and parks - to have adequate shade.

But tree experts say policies, practices and consumer choices throughout the region are decreasing the number of big, shady trees in our future.

The foundation is pushing a "Greenprint" program that would put trees - big trees, especially - into the general plan of every local government in the region and double the area's canopy of trees by 2045.

The organizers envision coordinated management of the "urban forest" that stretches over Sacramento and five other counties - El Dorado, Placer, Yuba, Sutter and Yolo.

To succeed, the plan will have to counteract a host of trends: new yards and landscape strips too small for big trees, the popularity of small, ornamental trees, ineffective shade ordinances and lots of bad pruning.

"When I first heard about this (plan), I thought it was quite ambitious considering how we're already Tree City USA," said Keith Wilson, a landscape architect with the Sacramento-based HLA Group.

But, Wilson said, he realized that without a regional tree plan, "not only will we not get (a tree canopy) where we don't have it, but we'll lose it where we've got it."

The most recent studies of the region's tree canopy, conducted in 1998 by Hashem Akbari's research group at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, showed a wide variation in coverage. East Sacramento was the most lush, with 27 percent shade coverage; a then-newly built area in Elk Grove had only 1.5 percent; a residential neighborhood in Carmichael had 20.5 percent; and a shopping center on Florin Road had 3 percent.

Greenprint organizers say that with a sustained tree planting and care program the region eventually could average a 35 percent canopy.

Greening a region is a tall order, especially for an organization that can't pass laws or set policy and doesn't have vaults of money.

Greenprint organizers have tried to get citizens and local governments in the region to share a vision that trees are worth planning for.

Connie Gallippi, Greenprint program director, gathered feedback at a dozen public meetings around the region this winter. In the coming months, she'll meet with city council members and county supervisors.

"It's innovative, because traditionally cities approach urban forestry on a local basis," said Greg McPherson, director of the U.S. Forest Service's Center for Urban Forest Research.

Gallippi is making a case for Greenprint with the idea that trees have value - measurable, monetary value - beyond aesthetics and summertime shade.

She cites tree studies showing other benefits: Large yard trees reduce storm-water runoff and raise property values, and shady parking lots induce shoppers to shop longer. Another shows cars parked in shady lots on hot summer days release less smog-causing compounds, which helps the region meet clean-air standards.

But, McPherson said, it's often difficult to make the benefits of trees tangible to the person or company that bears the cost of planting and nurturing them.

In the region's fast-growing suburbs, many construction and landscaping practices work against a large shade canopy, as Folsom city arborist Joe Benassini pointed out on a tour of local parking lots.

Like most municipalities in the region, Folsom has an ordinance requiring that plans for a new parking lot include trees that, when mature, will shade 40 percent of the lot.

Benassini said that while project drawings presented to the city Planning Commission depict shady parking lots, the trees seldom develop as planned, due mainly to compacted soil and poor pruning.

Contractors concerned about building a durable parking lot "want no air in the soil," he said. "Trees want lots of air."

Benassini and McPherson said researchers are testing ways to make parking lot soils strong enough to support cars and yet airy enough to let trees grow big. Trees in several lots in Davis are growing in these so-called "structural soils," but the method is still experimental and expensive.

Across the street, Benassini noticed a row of 8-foot-tall Chinese elms lined up against a sound wall and pruned like lollipops.

"Realistically, those trees aren't going to get any bigger than that," he said.

With proper pruning, Chinese elms grow to 40 or 50 feet, providing a broad canopy. But careful, year-after-year tree care costs a lot, he said, and often is seen as a hassle by landscape maintenance crews and store owners.

Benassini said Folsom is unlikely to fine or take legal action against violators of its shade ordinance. And as the city arborist, he sees his role as more of a teacher than a policeman.

"I don't want to be in a position where I am out there as an enforcement body," Benassini said.

At a recent Greenprint meeting in Folsom, however, some residents wished that city governments would do more to enforce good tree care.

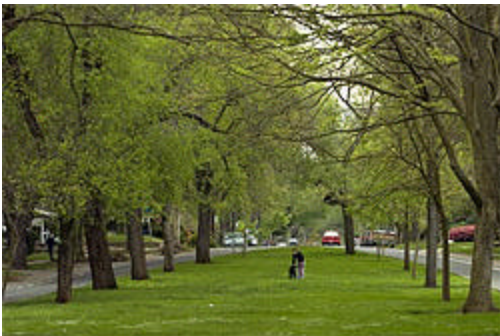
Grace Downing of Folsom said some of her neighbors' trees are "horrendously contaminated" with mistletoe, rendering futile her own vigilant pruning. Mistletoe, which is transmitted by birds, spreads readily from one tree to another in a neighborhood.

"It doesn't make any difference how many trees you plant if you don't require them to be taken care of," she said.

Urban canopy information

Sacramento Tree Foundation: www.sactree.com or (916) 924-8733

Center for Urban Forest Research: cufr.ucdavis.edu



Alex Anderson pauses beneath trees in the median on T Street near 42nd Street.



Sycamore trees line a walking/jogging path at McKinley Park in east Sacramento.



Chinese elms trimmed to 8 feet. With proper pruning, the trees grow to 40 or 50 feet



Trees in a Folsom parking lot - by city law - are supposed to shade 40 percent of the lot when mature but rarely develop as planned.