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Environmentalists push \$1 million program to save urban trees

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The shumard oak on a vacant lot in northwest Seattle was planted more than a century ago by Josephine Denny, a daughter of one of the city's founding families. Its trunk measured more than 3 feet across. The owner wanted it axed to make way for a house, even though the tree was on the edge of the property.

Across the lake in Kirkland, two old trees were also tagged to be cut down, squeezed out by development. One was a Western red cedar with drooping branches, a towering presence on the corner of the lot on Market Street. On an opposite corner stood a large old cypress.

What happened to the trees?



[zoom](#)

Jim Bryant / P-I

Doug McCallum climbs to a rooftop Friday to apply caulking on a house he's building in Kirkland, where city officials require the installation of chain-link fences, left, that protect a group of trees. A Western red cedar and cypress at the edge of the construction site also were saved. Protecting urban trees is a top priority for environmentalists in the upcoming session of the Legislature.

The cedar and cypress are still standing, thanks to Kirkland's tree preservation codes, which rank among the strictest in the region. By flipping his plans around, the developer made space for trees and houses.

The historic oak is now a stump. A neighbor begged the city to save the tree, but the landowner hired an arborist who said the oak -- which can live 500 years -- was "not in a condition that would make it a candidate for retention." A separate arborist called it a "champion" -- one of the best of its kind in the state.

Although the oak was unusual, its loss is a familiar story in Seattle, where officials say that half the tree canopy has disappeared since the 1970s as development increases and smaller homes give way to apartments, townhouses and megahomes.

Environmentalists eager to save urban trees are promoting the Evergreen Cities campaign, naming it one of their top four priorities for the legislative session that starts next Monday. They're pushing a \$1 million program to improve urban forests statewide.

Protections for urban trees vary widely in the Puget Sound region, contributing to a dramatic decline in the tree cover. Satellite images from the '70s are dominated by green swaths with black specks of buildings and roads. Recent pictures are practically reversed, with black oozing across the image and green patches shining through.

It's an urban deforestation seen nationwide. About 25 percent of city tree canopy vanished over the past 30 years, based on satellite image analysis by American Forests, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit group.

"There are millions of dollars of work that the trees do to clean the water and air," said Deborah Gangloff, executive director of the forestry group. "That's why the significant loss across the country is so alarming."

In addition to reducing air and water pollution, trees curb the flow of stormwater runoff, slow erosion, provide homes for birds and wildlife and absorb carbon dioxide, which contributes to climate change.

Governments globally are waking up to these benefits. The United Nations last year met a goal of planting 1 billion trees worldwide. The mayor of Los Angeles pledged to plant a million trees in his city. The Evergreen Cities campaign could be the first effort to try to "retree" an entire state.

"Our current population rate is projected to create 29 cities the size of Tacoma or Spokane by the middle of this century," said Heath Packard, policy director for Audubon Washington, which is leading the campaign. "We want to make sure we're doing what we can to retain our trees."

The Evergreen Cities legislation would:

- Establish a statewide inventory of urban trees (the state Department of Natural Resources also is separately requesting this legislation);
- Provide grants for local governments to pay for tree conservation;
- Support partnerships with nonprofit groups and schools to do restoration and plantings;
- Develop regional goals for increasing the land covered in trees;
- Aid cities in creating or improving tree protection regulations, and in writing management plans.

Finding tree-saving solutions won't be easy. While vegetation helps reduce greenhouse gas emissions and pollution, any benefits it provides could be undone by forcing home building out of urban centers and creating longer commutes.

"It's how to strike that balance," said Alan Justad, spokesman for Seattle's Department of Planning and Development. "But this administration has been very aggressive in that they want more trees and they want more growth."

What's an urban forest?

"Urban forest" is an oxymoron to many. So Sarah Griffith tries to help people see the forest for the cities.

"The urban forest is the forest where we live," explained Griffith, manager of the Department of Natural Resources' Urban Forestry Program.

"Look around you the next time you're out driving. Look at the trees and imagine how it would look if they were not there," she said. "They take off the hard urban edges. They make cities look pretty and inviting."

Northwest cities increasingly have lost their bloom in our population boom.

Part of the challenge comes from complying with the Growth Management Act, which tries to squeeze more development into urban areas so that rural spaces are spared for farming, parks, salmon and other wildlife.

Making room for trees inside areas slated for higher density could take precious land away from houses.

"We're all for trees, and we think they make communities more livable; the problem is with regulations that take away inventory for buildable lands," said Tim Harris, an attorney with the Building Industry Association of Washington, a trade group.

Some cities seem to have found a compromise between the two, and others are ready to follow their lead.

"I have a lot of cities who have called and are curious about what we do," said Stacey Ray, an urban forester with the city of Kirkland. Its rules went into effect two years ago and will be reviewed this spring.

And in Redmond, tree preservation and planting is one of the first topics discussed when a developer pitches a project, said Judd Black, development and review manager for the city.

Developers must abide by codes requiring that more than one-third of the big trees on a site be left standing. Every tree more than 6 inches in diameter that is removed has to be replaced. If developers insist on removing more than 35 percent of the trees, they would have to plant three trees for each one taken out.

"Very few people who develop in Redmond don't know about this," said Black, adding that the rules are about 10 years old. "Those who don't, we send them back to redesign it."

City officials around the region are trying to change the default approach of leveling a construction site to create a clean slate, to saving and building around trees. But they're understaffed in the area of tree protection and education. Planting designs take strategic planning so trees don't outgrow their spot or get tangled in power lines. Trees do get old and die, but people don't understand that it's better environmentally and economically to protect healthy, established trees than to plant spindly seedlings that die easily.

After all, it can take decades for a tree to root, grow fat with new rings and send out leaves to provide shade for a summer's picnic. And university research shows that trees can increase home values and retail sales while saving energy.

In Redmond, there are still residents who want more trees saved. There are developers who feel the rules are too strict. But the restrictions have kept the community in the green, in more ways than one.

"It really makes a difference in the development and how developments look," Black said. "And it doesn't appear to have hampered our growth any and as a result we've saved hundreds or thousands of trees."

Seattle's tree rules

Seattle, a tree-hugging, Gortex-loving, climate-change-fighting poster child, tries hard to be green.

Mayor Greg Nickels approved Seattle's first Urban Forest Management Plan last year and pledged over the next 30 years to plant 649,000 trees. He committed to a project restoring forested parks overrun with weeds and dominated by dying maples. The City Council set a goal of no net loss of tree canopy starting this year and wants to expand tree canopy coverage 1 percent a year until it doubles at 40 percent.

A task force is working with planning department staff to update tree protection rules. New regulations were supposed to be completed last year, but now aren't expected until mid-2008.

In the meanwhile, trees keep falling.

Residents hound city officials with worries over trees cut in parks, along roadways and on private property. They've documented cases in which the city failed to make developers fulfill tree-planting requirements. In one instance, the Department of Planning and Development signed off on a project that cleared a wooded slope in West Seattle to build multiple homes without a required revegetation plan to help stabilize it.

Seattle's tree lovers are so fed up they formed the Citizen Coalition for Trees to lobby their cause.

Justad, of the planning department, agreed that there were areas that needed improvement and said steps were being taken to better protect trees.

"I know we could do more," he said.

It's too late to help Laura Rothenberger. She's the neighbor who tried to save the historic trees next to her Northwest Seattle home, including the oak planted by Josephine Denny.

"They were not rotting. There was nothing wrong with them, they were on the perimeter of the property," she said.

"If we truly believe that trees are valuable environmentally and aesthetically, then this process has to be more

painstakingly careful," Rothenberger said. "In the environment we live today, this is not the best approach."

In all, four trees more than 2 to 3 feet in diameter and reaching up to 100 feet tall were removed from the property.

To replace them, the city-approved plan requires 10 new trees to be planted. They must each be 2 inches in diameter.

It takes a half-century or more for a 2-inch-wide sapling to become a shade tree with a 3-foot trunk.

BY THE NUMBERS

Environmentalists are trying to slow the disappearance of Washington's urban forests with their Evergreen Cities campaign. Research by the University of Washington's College of Forest Resources shows there's plenty of room for improvement.

10% of cities and counties have up-to-date urban tree inventories.

12% have management plans that set goals for increasing the amount of trees.

20% do routine tree care, leaving trees vulnerable to pests, disease and pruning that damages trees.

47% of communities have tree ordinances to protect trees. Many report a need for better enforcement.

TREE PRESERVATION REGULATIONS VARY

Tree preservation regulations vary widely around the Puget Sound region, where the amount of tree canopy has sharply declined. Protecting trees on private property is key to saving the urban forest; in Seattle, about 74 percent of the land base is privately owned.

Trees on developed residential property, and not in critical areas*

- Redmond:
 - Permit required for removal of significant trees (those measuring 6 inches diameter)
 - Can remove up to two significant trees a year, but must replace each tree with one measuring 2.5 inches diameter for deciduous, 6 feet tall for a conifer
- Seattle:
 - No permits required, no restrictions on tree removal for homes built before the mid-1990s
 - Restrictions on larger tree removal at houses with tree landscaping requirements (homes built after the mid-'90s)

Trees in new development (does not apply to mid- or high-rise and commercial development), and not in critical areas*

- Redmond:
 - Must maintain 35 percent of significant trees (measuring 6 inches diameter) on the site; each significant tree that is removed must be replanted
 - If more than 35 percent of trees are removed, must be replaced with three new trees for each tree cut
 - Landmark trees (measuring more than 30 inches diameter) removed only with special exemption
- Seattle:
 - All trees may be removed except exceptional trees (those with a unique historical, ecological or esthetic value)
 - Either through tree retention or replanting must have 2 inches of tree diameter per 1,000 square feet of lot area for lots larger than 3,000 square feet (i.e., a 5,000 square-foot lot requires five 2-inch-diameter trees)
 - Exceptional trees can be removed if sick, or if preventing development on more than 35 percent of lot area even with smaller setbacks and increased height

* Critical areas include steep slopes or near streams

Sources: Seattle Department of Planning and Development, Redmond Department of Planning and Community Development

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