

Funding Your Urban Forest Program

A Guide for New and Seasoned City Foresters

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Remember the good old days when we had all the money we needed for our urban forestry programs? No? Well, me neither. In over three decades of being a municipal forester, whether working for the City of Cincinnati or consulting for other communities, I've never heard anyone say, "Budget increase? No thank you; we're good."

Sure, things were slightly better when U.S. Forest Service pass-through grants were available, but then that funding was "redesigned," and like salt in the wound, the great recession of 2008 hit, causing municipal general funds to plummet, and some cities to actually go broke. Because of budget pressures over the last decade, some fledgling urban forestry programs disappeared, and some established ones got very nervous.

We've always needed more funding. Traditionally, municipal urban forest management program funding comes from one primary source—the general fund—with some pocket-change revenue from capital budgets, grants, and even firewood sales.

But these days, urban forest managers need to take a page from a financial advisor's playbook and seek and secure funding from multiple sources so our budgets are sustainable and to ensure against the shifting sands of the national economy and local politics. Funding for urban forest management can also be affected by factors such as competing departmental budgetary priorities, changes in public opinion, newly elected leadership, and severe weather events.

When it comes to our budgets, we need to heed our own advice against monocultures. We shouldn't rely on just one funding source, because you never know what will happen. And, as our personal financial planners would tell us, in order to maintain a viable urban forestry program under changing conditions in an unpredictable future, diversifying our funding sources will minimize the impacts of funding cuts from any one area.

Later I'll present a comprehensive list of the various funding sources to consider, but first, urban forest managers need to think a bit more about the "ask." What is your message? Why should your program be given more funding? How are you presenting it? Who are you presenting it to?

What is your message?

Every community's priorities and urban forest conditions may be different, but the message should be the same: *trees are a good investment*. Your message at budget time (and even the rest of the year) is that the urban forest should be viewed as a multi-dimensional asset that has value now and will have even more value in the future. You need to say clearly and repeatedly that it should not be treated as a cost center, but instead as a profit center. With all the irrefutable benefit data we have now, elected officials and municipal administrators can be convinced to see funding our community forestry pro-

grams as a wise investment strategy.

Throughout the year, look and listen for what buttons to push with your message at budget time. Be savvy. If economic development is a hot button, your message should be about the contributions of trees to retail areas, rental rates, and property values. If air and water quality or stormwater mitigation are concerns, go ahead and confidently play the "trees are the answer" card.

Why should your program be given more funding?

Competition for municipal budget allocations can be fierce. Limited public funds need to be spent on projects and programs most needed by the community. Continuing with the profit center/wise investment theme, given trees' multiple benefits, the return-on-investment (ROI) can be a pretty convincing foundation upon which to ask for more and different funding.

For example, the ROI in Largo, Florida is \$3.01 in benefits for every dollar spent on public tree planting and care; the ROI in Elgin, Illinois is \$4.61; and in Pittsburgh, it's \$1.51. No U.S. city has reported a negative ROI for its urban forest. What other municipal department or program can claim that, or state that the value of the community asset they manage will increase every year?

Educate your budget-makers as to how urban forests contribute significantly to improving public health and safety and addressing some of the more serious concerns of almost all modern American cities—climate change, stormwater management, water and air quality, public health issues, energy use, carbon reduction, and social justice.

How are you presenting it?

As scientists and technical experts, we urban foresters tend to count on influencing decision-makers with a lot of facts, statistics, and figures. Unfortunately, facts sometimes put the problem or issue in the context of complex technical analysis and time scales that allow for inaction or endless procrastination by those decision-makers. Using the "just the facts, ma'am" approach fails to push two human nature buttons that even budget analysts and city managers have—the instinctual desire to contribute to the greater good and the positive emotional response to specific needs rather than overwhelming problems.

So, if you want to tap into the desires of decision-makers to contribute to the "greater good," you first need to build a case for why the "good" of the urban forest is greater than (or at least as great as) the others you are competing against. And you need to be specific about the budget needs of your urban forest rather than take a "sky is falling" tact.

Elected officials, municipal finance staff, city managers, department heads, and other purse-string holders are human beings, and will respond more positively to your request for increased funding if you can reorient your "ask" to appeal directly to their

Milwaukee's urban forestry program receives funding through the City's stormwater utility fee. Photo by Michelle Sutton



Pittsburgh city arborists get reimbursed for the administrative time to review development permits applications, review plans, and make site inspections. Photo by Michelle Sutton

human nature. That means you need to:

- Dramatize the current condition and explain how the failure of the urban forest would lead to the inability of the city to function at a variety of levels. Think tree loss from emerald ash borer, sudden oak death, extreme weather and the corresponding increases in liability, air pollution, flooding, and energy use.
- Personalize the problem. Get a testimonial from a citizen about how the loss of trees affected her child's asthma condition, or how the loss caused property values to drop in a councilperson's district.
- Put a price tag on potential storm recovery efforts and liability if there is inadequate funding for emergency and preventive tree maintenance.
- Admit the need to prioritize ALL infrastructure spending, but focus on asking decision-makers to place urban forestry funding on the same level as curb repair, stormwater control, and facilities maintenance. (You might have more initial success fighting for a piece of the existing pie before asking for the pie to get bigger).

Who are you presenting it to?

A golden rule in the art of communication and persuasion is "know your audience." Your piece of the general fund and capital budget pies are ultimately approved by city managers and elected officials. So you need to know what makes them tick (as well as what "ticks them off.") But before you get to the final stage of the budget battle, think about rallying some allies to your cause. Presenting a united front with traditional *and* non-traditional partners can make it hard for even the craftiest politician to say no.

Rally the support of non-profits for your budget requests, not just your tree planting projects. Non-profits have leaders who are proficient in educating policy-makers, engaging community support, building diverse partnerships, and being innovative fundraisers. Non-profits have the ability to move in political and social circles where urban foresters are not allowed to or are afraid to tread. Tree Pittsburgh, Greening of Detroit, Trees Forever, Trees Lafayette, and Friends of Grand Rapids Parks are a few examples of non-profits that have helped their municipal arborists get what they need financially.

Think about non-traditional partners too, like your local emergency management agency, stormwater utility, power company,

philanthropic organizations, and corporate foundations. More and more, urban forestry programs impact and/or intersect with these partners' missions and they can be prime candidates for getting you budget support.

Sources of Funding

The year 2016 may be the perfect time to ask for more funding. The economy is better, the climate is changing (literally), and people/voters are into green solutions. There are a myriad of sources for funding; some are tried and true, and others are emerging markets that can offer hefty dividends with a little investment of your time. As a caveat, some of the sources described here may not be available or practical for you, and may not be authorized by your city or state.

- ▶ **General Fund** – This is the most common funding source for urban forestry programs. Ask for a bigger piece of the pie, and/or negotiate with other municipal departments to include line items in their budgets that support elements of your program.
- ▶ **Federal and State Government Grants** – As a public agency, urban forestry programs are in a good position to apply for and receive government grants. While U.S. Forest Services grants have become more regional and competitive, other federal grant programs have emerged that can fund tree planting, inventories, urban tree canopy assessments, and even tree maintenance. Take a look at U. S. EPA

grants (*Urban Waters Small Grants, Environmental Justice, and 319 grants*), the U.S. Department of *Transportation's Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER)* grant program, or simply go to www.grants.gov to see what's available for your particular need and situation. And, it goes without saying that you should stay in touch with your state urban forestry coordinator to learn about regional and state grant programs.

- ▶ **Corporate and Private Foundation Grants** – The business community is becoming more generous (and anxious to partner with green entities), and the endowments of private foundations are becoming flush again. As a public agency with non-profit status, staff, and administrative support systems, urban forestry programs are in a good position to apply for and receive private grants. Check out www.foundationcenter.org for private funding sources in your city. Partnering with a local non-profit can also reveal private funding sources in your area.
- ▶ **Taxes, Assessments, and Special Tax Districts** – The political atmosphere may not be quite right for asking for new taxes to support your program, but this is a legal and viable way to fund your program with the right amount of citizen support. Cincinnati, Ohio's urban forestry program is funded by a state-authorized special assessment; St. Louis, Illinois uses a combination of property tax and sales tax transfers; and Burlingame, California receives a portion of the gas tax.



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If increasing or adding citywide taxes is unpalatable, then consider including urban forestry projects in Tax Increment Financing, Landscape and Lighting Assessment Districts, and other Special Benefit Assessment Districts.

- ▶ **Capital Improvement Project Budgets** – If your city views trees as a capital asset (in which case, kudos to you!), then tree planting and sometimes maintenance can be a valid expenditure of large road, utility, or facility improvement projects. Milwaukee, Wisconsin has had success in making trees part of its right-of-way improvement projects for many years.
- ▶ **Stormwater Utility Fees** - This funding mechanism should get your undivided attention. It merits your effort to learn about your city’s stormwater fee system and asking for a piece of this pie. Milwaukee again leads the nation by example and has fully embraced funding its premiere urban forestry program through its stormwater utility fee. City leaders and staff understand that all of the urban forestry program’s services manage vegetation that helps mitigate stormwater runoff. For example, Milwaukee’s decision-makers understand the cause and effect rationale and accept that the cost to treat 13,000 ash trees annually to prevent canopy loss and thus avert increases in stormwater runoff is a legitimate stormwater management activity that can be funded by the fee. With that level of awareness, they recently approved a small increase in the fee, and earmarked it for urban forestry. Since stormwater fees are assessed to all property owners, including those that would be exempt from taxes, the increase in the stormwater fee was relatively small compared to a tax levy increase. This was certainly a relatively painless, win-win budget decision.
- ▶ **Tree Work and Land Development Permit and Inspection Fees** – To the extent permitted under state and municipal codes, permit and inspection fees can be a significant source of funding for your program. Urban forestry programs should get reimbursed for the administrative time to review development permits applications, review plans, and make site inspections. The City of Pittsburgh recognizes this and their program receives a proportional share of the fees collected annually, which then helps offset personnel expenses and funds urban forest improvement projects.
- ▶ **Compensatory Payment, Land Development Mitigation, and Environmental Fines** – When trees are damaged or removed (whether by an accident or a planned economic development project), municipalities should be compensated. Generally, this requirement and the compensation method should be codified, and should be clear about its applicability to public and/or private trees. Many, many cities across the U.S. have ordinances that stipulate this, and as a result have tree funds where compensatory payments, mitigation, or “in lieu of” fees and environmental

finances are deposited for a variety of uses and urban forest management projects.

- ▶ **Miscellaneous Funding Sources** – While providing smaller amounts to your bottom line, these funding mechanisms and sources should not be ignored since every little bit of revenue can help you accomplish specific projects and keep your funding portfolio diversified. These could include Adopt-A-Street and memorial and honor tree programs; wood product sales; utility bill donations; community or organizational fund-raising events; revenues from municipally-owned concessions and recreational facilities; and cash and in-kind donations.

Adequate funding is one of the greatest challenges facing urban forests today. Without sufficient resources to secure professional services, equipment, and management, an urban forestry program cannot fulfill its mission, respond to changes and challenges, and ultimately best serve the public.

No matter what funding sources you decide to pursue, follow these steps to increase your odds to get what you need:

1. Tell your story with words and a plot. In the budget process, too often we focus just on the numbers. Tell the decision-maker why two more staff is needed; describe the condition of the 100 trees to be removed; and detail the consequences of not getting the \$50,000 budget increase requested.
2. Don’t bury your lead. Your funding request should have one message that is up-front and clear. Before you even think about presenting any numbers, tell the decision-maker right away what is going to happen in the urban forest over the budget cycle, why it is needed, what goals will be realized, and what benefits will be provided.
3. Use visuals frequently. Columns of numbers can be boring at best and become incomprehensible at worst. Use graphs and photographs to illustrate your point in your budget documents.
4. Name your challenges. Don’t be afraid to be blunt; for example, you can say, “Given the woeful underinvestment in maintaining the urban forest, the condition of this valuable asset is declining/will decline, and this will be the result.”

When requesting additional or new funding, clearly state the need, explain why, and say what’s needed to keep the condition steady or to improve it. By naming your challenges, presenting solutions, and putting a price tag on it, your budget request can start a civic-minded conversation of how to gain more urban forestry investment from and for your community. 🌿