



June 25, 2019

Mayor Jenny A. Durkan
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RE: Please Support Updating Seattle's Tree Protection Ordinance

Dear Mayor Durkan,

Greetings from Seattle Audubon, the oldest environmental conservation organization in Washington State. Founded in 1916, we're now in our second century in service to birds, nature, and people. Today, we are one of the largest and most active Audubon chapters in the country, leading a local community over 4,000 strong in appreciating, understanding, and protecting birds. I write to you on behalf of those members to urge you to support updating Seattle's tree protection ordinance.

Trees are vital to the livability and character of Seattle. They are also critical for public health, climate resiliency, wildlife habitat, and for achieving greater social and environmental justice across the city. The current tree code has proven ineffective at protecting our iconic trees, and without stronger regulation, tree loss will continue to outpace tree replacement. Canopy cover will decline. Real, tangible benefits to the people of Seattle will be lost, as will habitat for resident and migratory birds.

The last point should concern more than just bird watchers. Meaningful conservation and climate action must have support from a wide constituency. Since more than 80% of Americans live in cities, urbanites are, and will continue to be, a key political and financial force for conservation. However, as city dwellers have fewer personal experiences in remote and wild places, we risk losing our connections to and appreciation for the natural world and, potentially, the motivation to conserve it. Thankfully there are birds. The daily interaction with wildlife that birds can provide helps us appreciate nature in our communities and supports participation in conservation within and beyond the city. Maintaining and enhancing bird diversity and abundance will help both the present and future conservation efforts that will be critical for mitigating the impacts of climate change and stemming the extinction crisis.

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Seattle's bird diversity is supported by its trees. Seattle Audubon's Neighborhood Bird Project monitors birds in Seattle parks each month and has done so continually since 1996. The data our volunteers have collected show that high percentage of canopy cover, particularly that provided by conifers, is correlated with increased observation frequency for forest-dependent birds. In other words, the greater the canopy cover, the more often we see birds. Perhaps this doesn't sound earth shattering, but here's the rub: the trend is logarithmic. Small changes in canopy cover have disproportionately large impacts on birds. If the city of Seattle as a whole fit our model, just a 5% reduction in canopy cover would result in a 35% reduction in bird observation frequency.

Without stronger tree protections, losing 5% of the urban canopy or more could happen quickly and easily. Development is the most urgent threat to the urban forest today. Recent upzoning and potential changes to detached accessory dwelling unit regulation could put even more trees on the chopping block. Increasing temperatures, prolonged summer drought, pollution, disease, and insect invasions will exacerbate tree loss and frustrate replacement efforts. Where big, old trees are removed and required to be replaced, lost benefits to the city would not be recovered for decades in the best of circumstances. Our circumstances are not the best and our big, old trees may be irreplaceable. Stressors from the urban environment and climate change can make it difficult for trees to attain the same proportions and provide the same benefits as they did in the past.

The most important thing we can do for our urban forest is to maintain the trees we have now. We need to slow tree loss however we are able. Updating the tree protection ordinance is a great place to start. The current tree code discounts the value of standing trees, puts too much faith in developers, and does not require tracking tree loss and replacement in a meaningful way. It has been ten years since the current code was adopted. We frequently receive calls from concerned citizens regarding tree loss in their neighborhoods. The question we hear most often is, "How is this allowed?"

Mayor Durkan, Seattleites are eager for stronger tree protection. Now is the time to support updating the tree code. Councilmember Bagshaw is working with the Urban Forestry Commission to understand the critical components of effective tree protection regulation. This will include expanding protections for significant and exceptional trees, improving transparency through a simple permitting process, requiring tracking tree

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removal and replacement, establishing a fee in-lieu payment system where developers are unable to replace trees on-site, and more. We urge you, too, to support tree protection at the executive level so that Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections, Office of Sustainability and Environment, and other city entities that manage trees are empowered to contribute staff time toward the development of fair, inclusive, and effective tree protection.

On behalf of Seattle Audubon and more than 4,000 local residents, please prioritize strengthening tree protection in Seattle.

Sincerely,



Joshua Morris
Urban Conservation Manager



Toby Ross
Senior Science Manager

cc: Council President Bruce A. Harrell; bruce.harrell@seattle.gov
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The Urban Forestry Commission; c/o Sandra Pinto de Bader