

STAFF REPORT

DATE: August 19, 2025

TO: City Council

FROM: Stan Gryczko, Assistant City Manager

SUBJECT: Unmet Maintenance Needs for City Trees and Sidewalks: Short-Term Program Adjustments and Review of Long-Term Changes for Council Discussion

Recommendations

1. Receive an informational report from staff on short-term reallocation of resources to establish a sidewalk inspection program within the City's Streets Division, and short-term operational changes in the Urban Forestry Division; and
2. Provide direction to staff to return with more information on key areas of focus for any long-term programmatic changes for either or both divisions.

Fiscal Impact

Costs associated with this item to date include staff time to prepare this report which is borne by the Public Works Utilities & Operations budget. Fiscal impacts associated with the establishment of a sidewalk inspection program and modifications to Urban Forestry, as presented in this report, are intentionally within the current operating budget of these divisions. The report also discusses necessary adjustments to current workloads within the divisions to accommodate these programs. The fiscal impacts of any long-term program modifications that are requested by Council will be outlined in future reports on those topics. The program budget support for both Urban Forestry and the sidewalk maintenance section of the Streets Division comes from the City's general fund.

Council Goals

This subject aligns with the following City Council goals to:

- Ensure a safe, healthy, and equitable community
- Pursue environmental sustainability
- Enhance a vibrant downtown and thriving neighborhoods

Commission Input

This item is being presented to City Council as a follow-up to the direction given to staff during the recent citywide budget adoption process (meetings held on May 20, June 3 and June 17, 2025) to discuss the unmet maintenance needs of the urban forestry division, and streets' division responsibility for trees and sidewalks. Long-term program augmentations are not being proposed at this time, but staff is seeking further direction from Council on priority areas to address. Once Council provides direction on long-term updates, staff will work with the applicable commissions, as directed by Council, to develop any additional guidance or recommendations before implementing any programs.

Background

During the City Council discussions regarding the adoption of the FY 26/28 Budget, Councilmembers requested that staff return after the adoption of the budget for a deeper dive into the maintenance of two City assets; specifically, City trees and sidewalks. The management of both of these assets falls under the responsibility of the Public Works Utilities & Operations Department, and both are chiefly supported by the City's general fund. It is important to note that while the Streets Division does receive support from other revenue sources, sidewalk maintenance is exclusively funded by the general fund. The City's tree planting program is also partially supported by tree mitigation fees.

Both divisions have unmet needs that require short-term operational modifications (within allocated budgets) to address these gaps, as well as larger, longer-term solutions to fully address the issues.

This report will discuss the unmet needs for each division, detail the short-term operational changes staff have already and will implement to begin closing the gaps between budget and service delivery, and conclude with options for longer-term solutions for Council deliberation. If Council wishes to further discuss one or more of the longer-term solutions, staff will return with more detailed information, along with any associated cost increases or reductions.

Urban Forestry

The City of Davis' urban tree canopy includes at least 30,000 inventoried trees under the purview of the Urban Forestry division. Additionally, staff estimates there are several thousand more trees within the City's responsibility that have not yet been inventoried. Currently, the division has allocated resources for six full-time staff members: one Urban Forestry manager, two Urban Forestry supervisors, two Urban Forestry technicians, and one office administrator. There is also one full-time contracted tree maintenance crew, along with a secondary contract crew that works for several months each year. The total staffing cost equals just under \$860,000 annually.

The Urban Forestry Division currently operates using both a proactive and request-based model. This includes a seven-year proactive pruning cycle and a service request system that allows residents to call in with tree-related questions and concerns. For proactive block pruning, the City utilizes a map that delineates specific blocks to be pruned every seven years. A current challenge for the proactive pruning program is the number and type of service requests from residents have increased significantly each year. Due to resident expectations regarding the response to these requests, the tree maintenance crew is often pulled away from proactive pruning to address requests that are not always urgent from a tree health or risk perspective. This creates difficulty in managing the program, as community expectations don't align with the City's priorities.

Proactive pruning efforts play a crucial role in a well-maintained urban tree canopy. Data shows that well-maintained trees are less likely to fail and, in turn, require fewer out-of-schedule service requests to the City. However, under Urban Forestry Division's current model, the more service request calls received, the more delayed proactive pruning

efforts become. This delay results in even more service requests due to deferred maintenance. Adding to this challenge is the community's expectation of direct contact with Urban Forestry team members. Currently, it is not standard practice for the division to provide a direct response to residents who request an assessment. The division is simply not staffed to a level where individual contact is possible. Typically, the Public Works Utilities & Operations Department front office administrative team relays information from the arborist's work order to the property owner, which means the property owner will not speak directly to an urban forestry professional. Perhaps understandably, this communication often fails to satisfy the property owner, leading them to demand more time and resources than the situation would normally merit. Establishing clear expectations for communication and service requests would help allocate resources more effectively within the division.

As staff has discussed with Council previously over the last few years, particularly with the development of the Urban Forest Management Plan in 2023, current service level expectations cannot be met with existing allocated resources. While additional resources have been provided, the needs of the program still far outstretch the current funding sources, which has led to these discussions around systematic changes to align operations with resources.

Addressing Sidewalks

The City's Streets Division maintains 275 miles of sidewalks. Currently, sidewalk inspections are conducted on a complaint-based approach both when reported from the public and city staff when they observe issues in the field. When issues are reported, Streets Division team members are dispatched within three working days to assess and document any concerns found. Immediate hazards are addressed, and any additional necessary work is added to work requests or placed on a list for future corrections as funding allows. Current practices include grinding uneven sidewalks, temporary ramping of larger offsets, replacement of sidewalk panels, and grouping larger efforts into other road or bike path projects being undertaken as Capital Improvement Projects (CIPs) by Public Works Engineering and Transportation.

It should be noted that although State law places maintenance responsibility for sidewalks on the adjacent property owner when there is one, the City has traditionally accepted responsibility for maintenance and replacement of sidewalks that front private property.

The reliance on reported sidewalk issues present two main challenges. First, some areas of town have a lower volume of traffic such that issues might go unnoticed until the resources required for repair are beyond current operational capabilities. Secondly, not all residents are aware that the City has systems¹ in place to report problems, and many may not think to do so, resulting in numerous issues going unreported.

¹ The City has an app called My Davis that residents can install on their phone to report issues to the City on the go. More information on the app can be found here: <https://www.cityofdavis.org/how-do-i/make-a-service-request>

Short-Term Programmatic Changes

Urban Forestry

Over the past three years, significant changes have been made to the Urban Forestry Division, focusing on the level of service in responding to service requests and other day-to-day operations. The division continues to strive toward maintaining a healthy and safe urban forest within its allocated budget. Several operational areas the division has already or is in the process of adjusting include:

1. Prioritization of a New Inventory

Before implementing any short- or long-term modifications to the program, it's essential to first conduct a complete inventory of the trees located in the City's right-of-way and easements. This inventory will help create a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the urban forest as it currently exists. The process will involve going through old tree records, development agreements and other documentation to clarify ownership and maintenance responsibilities with respect to our existing tree canopy. This will also reduce the time staff currently spends determining ownership and addressing work that is done on private trees, especially in instances where the tree is within the public right-of-way or tree easement area.

In conjunction with the updated tree inventory, a tree risk management program should be developed. This program would operate within the constraints of the existing budget and utilize a tree risk assessment program (TRAP) that enables the City to efficiently manage the urban tree canopy. Without an updated inventory this type of program would not be truly data driven or holistic in its approach to alleviating tree risk. Any kind of long-term TRAP program would require additional resources or adjustments to current program activities (exactly what is unknown at this time), however utilizing contractors to assist in this program could alleviate some of the burden on City staff time.

What exactly the inventory would look like is a future discussion, but it's important to underscore that without completing this new inventory, the City will be relying on inadequate and outdated data that is over seven years old. This existing data also does not account for trees with undetermined ownership status or that have come under the City's care, either when unclaimed or due to dissolution of HOA responsibilities.

2. Reduction of Service Request-Based Tree Work

Until recently, the standard practice for addressing tree service requests involved an inspection by a City arborist, followed by the creation of work orders for any issues with the tree. These work orders could include anything from sidewalk/road/house clearance to complete removals. The program has already started to reduce the number of work orders created by limiting or completely removing certain previously provided services; one example of this is the discontinuation of mistletoe removal. While mistletoe is unsightly and can be a

pest to trees, its effects are typically minimal and slow to develop. The Urban Forestry Division decided that mistletoe removal would only be included in work orders for more serious tree problems, thereby lessening the number of work orders stemming from service requests. Other frequently requested services, such as end-weight reduction and building clearance, would be dependent on available resources and could be delayed until future whole-scale maintenance efforts.

The City has also begun the proactive removal of certain species that, while not “officially” dead or dying, may be in the wrong location, or less likely to thrive under current conditions. This approach aims to prevent repeated failures and reduce the need for return work orders. This also allows the division to address an aging canopy by targeting removals and planting new species, facilitating a smoother transition to a newer climate-ready tree canopy.

Finally, the City Council recently approved updates to the City Code allowing homeowners to complete any “non-substantial pruning” of City trees without a permit. This change enables the City to close out work orders where property owners can use hand tools to prune trees.

Urban Forestry will continue to assess and look at reducing and/or lessening the level of services provided based on service requests, where it can be done safely. It is important to recognize that these efforts may be met with frustration and concern from the public as the City becomes more stringent on the service provided for managing its urban canopy to align with its allocated budget.

3. *Modification of Proactive Tree Pruning Work*

Proactive pruning for trees in designated High Occupancy Zones (HOZ) was approved by Council on April 1, 2025. As discussed during that Council meeting, these HOZ include high-traffic areas such as downtown, parks, greenbelts, etc.

Sidewalk Inspections

As with the Urban Forestry Division, fundamental changes in the prioritization of workload for the Streets Division are necessary to focus existing resources on the most critical assets the division is responsible for maintaining. To achieve this, staff is developing a sidewalk inspection program that will supplement existing reactive work by initiating a proactive approach to sidewalk inspection, using existing operation resources. This inspection program will require a reduction in the prioritization of other current workloads to focus on more critical infrastructure needs. The framework of this program is as follows:

1. *Sidewalk Inspection Program*

The Sidewalk Inspection Program includes a comprehensive inspection process that is designed to detect any vertical or horizontal displacements in the sidewalk that exceed 1/2 of an inch. Any displacement at this threshold and beyond will be assessed to determine which method to correct the issue will be implemented.

Each inspection will be conducted by a team of two crew members, one full-time and one part-time employee. Inspections will utilize rotating one-mile grids that cover the five council-represented zones. The overall goal is to inspect the City on a 5 year cycle, addressing any surface irregularities efficiently. Any identified damage will be documented using a standardized inspection template. It should be noted that not all identified deficiencies can or will be addressed in the same year they are identified due to the current limitations of resources for the Streets Division. However, the City will have a prioritized list and work to correct certain areas as resources allow.

Long Term Programmatic Options for Council Discussion

While short-term augmentations to programs can be accomplished within current resources (with some priority shifting), ultimately long-term changes to both the Urban Forestry Division and Streets Division sidewalk operations will be necessary to completely close the gap between budget and programming. As the options for long-term changes involve significant adjustments within the Divisions, staff is asking Council to provide feedback on which options, if any, presented below would benefit from further review and discussion.

Urban Forestry

1. Reduction of Proactive Pruning Tree Work

The City has aimed to maintain a 7-year pruning cycle, intending for every City tree to be pruned within the designated geographical blocks every 7 years. However, the City has struggled to stay on schedule due to an increase in service requests, rising labor costs and limited resources. With current funding of \$1.1M dollars, there are sufficient funds to support two contract crews for a few months every year. In reality, to keep up with block pruning and service requests within the existing budget, a second full-time contract crew is needed. Currently, the single contract crew is frequently pulled from proactive block pruning every time there is an emergency or a backlog of service requests, resulting in a substantial delay in proactive pruning. As a result, the City is more realistically aligned with a 12-15 year pruning cycle. This has forced Urban Forestry to reassess how proactive pruning is structured.

Several budget-based options Urban Forestry is considering would involve significant changes to the current operation of the proactive pruning program. A shift from geographical-based proactive work to size, health or traffic based proactive tree work would help the Urban Forestry Division more closely align with current allocated resources. Regardless of the path forward, an updated inventory and a strong tree risk assessment program will be essential to the City's efforts to manage the urban forest effectively. By focusing efforts on proactive inspections on larger trees, trees of poorer health and areas with higher occupancy, the City can better utilize current resources to address the trees that require it most. However, this approach may result in long-term impacts on tree health and structure, a reduced level of service for request-based work, and an increase in staff time dedicated to inspections. More specific impacts can be provided in future reports if the Council wishes to explore these options further.

2. *Reduction of City Tree Planting and Ownership*

When looking forward to the long-term maintenance of Davis' urban tree canopy, decreasing the reliance on the City's Urban Forestry Division has to be taken into consideration. This means looking at alternatives where the City is not responsible for the long-term maintenance and ownership of as many trees. As part of the City's Urban Forest Management Plan (UFMP), the City made a pledge for no net loss in urban tree canopy. To maintain this goal, the replacement of trees the City loses must continue. With these goals in mind, there are a number of ways to diversify the maintenance, ownership, and responsibility of the trees that comprise Davis' urban forest. Chiefly, this option will focus on reducing the number of city-maintained trees on private property.

Currently, the City contracts with Tree Davis, a local non-profit organization, implement the City's community tree planting efforts on both City property and private property (within the tree planting easement). These efforts include purchasing and planting trees, engaging the community, developing planting plans, and providing 5-year tree maintenance on young trees. This \$200,000 contract is funded through a combination of general fund and tree mitigation dollars.

The City's annual planting goal of no net loss in urban canopy equates to approximately 200 trees per year, however over the last few seasons, the City planting rates have not kept pace with the rate of tree removals, which have been increasing over recent years due to factors such as the aging tree population, climate change, and deferred maintenance. This increase of removals has not been met with an ongoing funding source that can match a one-for-one replacement planting program.

To alleviate the City's resource burden regarding tree management, the City Council should consider adjusting the City's approach to tree planting. Potential options the City could consider include the transfer of ownership and maintenance responsibilities of the tree directly after planting, implementing a giveaway program where the resident is responsible for the planting and maintaining a tree provided by the city, or doing away with City funded planting and just promoting the planting of trees by residents. Additionally, the City could focus its planting efforts on the replacement of trees on City property, such as parks, greenbelts, and public right of ways, reducing the number of City trees on private property through attrition. All of these options have a number of positives and negatives, but help bring the program closer to within budget long-term. A combination of these efforts could lessen the long-term burden of tree maintenance on the City while providing a possible avenue for following UFMP goals.

It is important to note any long-term planting efforts on private property where the tree is not owned by the City must take into account the lack of tree protections

on single-family/duplex properties, even if the trees exceed 5 inches diameter at breast height (DBH). For future planting efforts that may involve planting trees on these types of properties, the Council should consider additional protections in City Code, or it must be understood that no protections may be in place. Additional monitoring and enforcement would require additional resources; however, protecting these trees would assist the City in meeting UFMP goals.

3. *Shifting Ownership for Existing City Trees*

As previously mentioned, the City may consider shifting maintenance responsibilities or, in certain cases, tree ownership to property owners when a City tree is located on private property, or in cases when the ownership of the tree is unclear (for instance, when an HOA that was previously responsible for trees ceases business). However, shifting tree ownership on a large scale is likely to be prohibitively challenging.

4. *Changing Tree Planting and Maintenance Requirements for Future Developments*

Current code requires a street tree fee to be paid and a tree planted at every City street-fronting property when property is subdivided. These trees are typically owned and maintained by the City. Regardless of how the Urban Forestry Division addresses long-term issues, this practice should be updated. Ideally, the one-time street tree fee would be increased, and/or the responsibility of ownership and maintenance should be fully transferred to the property owner, as discussed earlier. Furthermore, it is important to note that the City Code does not protect private trees on single family/duplex properties. Although additional resources would be necessary to process increased permit requests if tree protections were prioritized, this would protect the tree from current or future property owners who could just remove the trees once the project is complete.

The process for tree plantings in commercial/multifamily developments and larger projects is also overdue for a review. When greenbelts, parks or other areas with City-owned or maintained assets are part of a new development, and responsibility is the City's for maintenance, additional sustainable funding or HOA maintenance would be necessary to support the expansion of service. Without additional funding, any modifications to the program to reduce operations now could be negated by increased numbers of trees within the City's ownership and maintenance responsibility in the future.

5. *Increase Revenue*

Not all methods of addressing a budget shortfall require program reductions or cuts. The Council could direct staff to return with additional information on the adjustment of existing sources of program revenue, or options for increasing revenue.

a) *Review and adjust program revenue to reflect current costs.*

The fees associated with the Urban Forestry Division are outdated, with many remaining unchanged since the first Community Forest

Management Plan in 2002. The mitigation amount for trees is, for example, \$189/inch, and the Street Tree Fee is \$143, while the cost to plant a new tree in 2025 is closer to \$350. These fees are also only one-time fees, and do not take into account the ongoing young tree care to ensure the establishment of the tree, or the long-term pruning.

- b) *Increase mitigation fees and add monetary penalties for non-compliance.*
One of the most frequent complaints about the tree program shared with City staff is the lack of enforcement tools to hold property owners accountable for the maintenance of City and/or protected trees. Currently, the City does not have penalties associated with performing unpermitted tree work on a protected tree or for intentionally harming a tree. Establishing a penalty structure is an important and necessary tool for enforcement, and a potential source of additional revenue for program operations, especially around quality control and inspections.
- c) *Consider a special tax, or, for future developments, establish community facilities districts (CFDs) to support urban forestry services for trees.*
A special tax would be subject to a higher standard of approval from the community, and CFDs are a discussion at the time of each development to determine support.

Sidewalks

1. *Transferring Maintenance Responsibilities to Property Owners*

State law holds that property owners abutting a public street are responsible for maintaining adjacent sidewalks in a safe condition. Currently, the City Code does not assign maintenance obligations to property owners; it only requires that they keep the sidewalk free and clear of obstructions, including property, debris, green waste (such as leaves, fruit or seeds), and other loose, slippery materials. While transferring maintenance responsibilities to property owners could potentially lower costs for the City, additional resources would be necessary to develop and maintain an effective enforcement program to hold property owners responsible for maintenance and repair, and this does not eliminate the responsibility of the City to inspect sidewalks. The inspection and enforcement effort would include one dedicated full-time employee.

2. *Create a dedicated crew for sidewalk maintenance*

Rather than working within existing resources, the Council could consider hiring two additional full-time employees whose main duty is sidewalk inspection and maintenance. This would be the most complete inspection program (with staffing and resources), but would increase need for general fund support.

Next Steps

Any guidance or direction from Council regarding long-term discussions for program delivery of the Urban Forestry or Streets Division will be noted and brought back to Council at a future meeting.