

DRAFT

April 2, 2024

Jeffrey McKay, Chairman
Members, Fairfax County Board of Supervisors
12000 Government Center Parkway
Fairfax, VA 22035

Sent by email to: clerktothebos@fairfaxCounty.gov

RE: FY2025 Fairfax County Budget and 3rd Quarter FY2024 Budget Review

Dear members of the Board of Supervisors:

The Tree Commission (TC) joins many residents of Fairfax County in commenting on the FY2025 Budget and the 2024 3rd Quarter Review, specifically as related to natural resources and the preservation, maintenance and expansion of our urban forest.

The TC appreciates the Board of Supervisors (BOS)'s commitment to, and work on behalf of, our urban forest. It is a pleasure to work with you to identify both the benefits of our trees as well as the opportunities we have to preserve and maintain them for future generations of Fairfax residents. Some of those opportunities are part of the budget process, and the TC lists some recommendations below.

Third Quarter Review:

1. **Supplement the Tree Planting and Preservation Fund.** The TC recommends that a portion of any available overage in the Environmental and Energy Program (EEP) budget* or other sources be allocated to the Tree Planting and Preservation Fund (TPPF) to provide staff and materials to the Urban Forest Management Division (UFMD) for the fall 2024 tree planting season. *formerly the Environmental Improvement Program or EIP
2. **Enhance funding for FCPA's Park Operations Division - Forestry for needed tree maintenance.** The TC recommends that FCPA Forestry receive additional funds to provide maintenance and preservation services for mature trees that are not labeled high-risk. Current funding *only* covers immediate high-risk tree removal. Funding to mitigate threats to mature healthy trees and prevent a high-risk removal is critically needed.

FY2025 Budget Cycle:

1. **Keep the Proposed Tax Rate.** The TC recommends that the BOS go forward with the publicly proposed maximum tax rate increase in order to keep funding requests stable and

moving in a forward direction. This is necessary because Fairfax County simultaneously must pay for the level of service that residents expect, including a healthy urban forest. The County continues to provide tax relief to lower income residents.

2. **Provide clarity as to who has spending authority for a tree planting budget allocation.** The TC recommends clarity in the Office of Environmental and Energy Coordination (OEEC) which has budgeted \$500K for tree planting. The TC assumes that this item is designed for staff and materials to support vigorous tree planting efforts throughout the County to meet Countywide Energy and Climate Action Plan (CECAP) and Resilient Fairfax goals. Because there is no mention of UFMD or FCPA Natural Resources, which are already focused on tree planting, it is unclear whether these agencies will have access to these funds for either planting or maintenance, or whether these funds will stand up a separate planting program.
3. **Fund additional staff positions so the County has the ability to preserve more trees in Capital Projects.** The TC recommends that the Department of Public Works and Environmental Sciences (DPWES) and FCPA Natural Resources Branch's Natural Capital Protection Program receive funding for several staff positions (ecologist/urban forester) to enable the agency to better preserve trees by:
 - scaling up staffing with increased stormwater management funding instead of assigning work to expensive outside contractors;
 - working with all County agencies to seek opportunities for incorporating green infrastructure in *all* County projects;
 - participating in agency oversight of all projects scheduled in RPAs to assess threats to local native plant communities and provide mitigation opportunities ahead of the engineering design phase.
4. **Fund the Invasives Management Area (IMA) Program as a line item.** The TC recommends that the IMA program be funded as a line item in the FY2025 budget. This will provide staff with operational stability and allow hiring merit positions. This should be in addition to the annual EEP grants available to that program.
5. **Defer moving the current, highly successful County Deer Management Program from the FCPD as part of a budget approved consolidation with the Animal Shelter.** (<https://www.fairfaxCounty.gov/budget/sites/budget/files/Assets/documents/fy2025/advertised/volume1/96.pdf>.) Moving the Deer Management Program to an agency best situated to manage it needs input from current Animal Protection Police Officers, personnel representatives, all staffers in natural resource related agencies who carefully manage the urban forest to prevent deer browse, and the public. Without this program's continued success, the County will not be able to overcome deer browse to establish a healthy "succession" forest, with generations of healthy trees surviving to take over when our mature trees die out.

Comments on Future Annual Budget and Carryover Planning:

- 1. Provide a line item in the budget for UFMD tree planting and maintenance.** As mentioned above in the 3rd Quarter Review carryover comments, one current source of UFMD tree planting money is the EEP grant fund. This funding has increased plantings in vulnerable communities, where quality of life is deeply affected by heat islands and concrete deserts. While grateful for these occasional infusions of funds, the TC recommends that EEP funding be robust enough to continue funding these UFMD requests annually. In addition, we recommend the funding be increased at every carryover opportunity until this can become a line item for UFMD in the budget. This sustained funding for tree planting, maintenance and public outreach/education efforts will help the County meet its urban canopy goals.
- 2. Provide a regular line item for robust funding to the TPPF.** Currently the TPPF is funded by developer fees, however there is no state legislation preventing additional funding from the general budget. The TPPF has funded tree plantings on FCPS properties and could be widely expanded to partner with organizations working with County faith congregations and businesses to forest their properties. It also has funded public education efforts about the benefits and importance of trees to our community.
- 3. Establish an invasive plant management program to *all* County owned properties.** The TC recommends that the BOS stand up a fully staffed (with merit positions) and funded Invasives Removal program dedicated to invasives plant removal across all County owned properties, not just FCPA. A new program could absorb the current FCPA's IMA program or be a sister program for other non-FCPA owned property. Additionally, the program should include significant grant opportunities to private property owners as invasives do not honor property lines, and the combined efforts of government and homeowners are needed to combat this threat to the County's climate and resiliency goals. For the same reasons, it would be necessary to expand VDOT's current agreements with individual volunteers to allow the removal of invasive species on its Right of Way property. Currently, the IMA effort relies on hundreds of County volunteers trying to prevent the most egregious and visible tree deaths. Invasive vines are as serious a threat to our urban forest as some other insect pests which are being combatted with a steady revenue source (i.e., a percentage of the real estate tax). We must recognize that the County cannot meet its tree canopy goals with a fragmented approach and reliance on volunteers. That is not a sustainable model for the permanent success that we need.
- 4. Budget for more permanent, full time merit positions as on-site park managers.** Funding for these critical staff jobs has in recent years been deferred to cover critical infrastructure needs. These front line personnel play an important role in identifying and often rectifying forestry, grounds, trails, and gardens maintenance needs. They are the first line of defense in helping to preserve and protect our urban forest, and they are the people who interface with park visitors on issues of preservation and care of our precious natural resources.

5. **Allocate a portion of the bag tax to fund messaging about trees on reusable bags.** The TC believes that this would help educate our citizens about the benefits of trees, tree pests and invasive species management, as well as how to preserve and maintain the urban forest.

Thank you for your attention to our budget recommendations that are designed to preserve, protect and expand our urban forest, essential because of all the known benefits of trees and their impacts on our County residents' quality of life. The CECAP and Resilient Fairfax policies have high aspirational climate mitigation and resiliency goals, but they need and deserve commensurate budget support. As you approach developing the FY2026 budget, the TC will follow up with appropriate comments on these future opportunities.

Sincerely

Cindy Speas, Chair
Fairfax County Tree Commission

Cc: Bryan Hill, Fairfax County Executive
Rachel Flynn, Deputy County Executive
Jai Cole, Fairfax County Park Authority Executive Director
Kiel Stone, Fairfax County Park Authority Board Chair
Chris Herrington, Director Department of Public Works and Environmental Services