



County of Fairfax, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: June 13, 2025

TO: Fairfax County Board of Supervisors

FROM: Larry J. Zaragoza, DEnv, Chair,
Environmental Quality Advisory Council

SUBJECT: Tree Plantings and Heat Islands

Recognizing that development and road construction are resulting in tree loss, the Environmental Quality Advisory Council (EQAC) is recommending that the county build upon existing county practices that plant trees in heat islands by targeting heat islands with vulnerable populations to help reduce the impact of climate change and meet our tree canopy goal.

Background:

Fairfax County is experiencing a loss of trees and associated tree canopy to development and roadway construction. Development of properties often involves clearcutting most if not all trees. Developers may be required to plant some new trees, but the new plantings generally do not provide the same number and canopy as the area had before development. Community concerns for the loss of trees in the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) right of way to support road construction projects are growing. Significant tree loss results from VDOT practices to meet line of sight requirements or stable slope contours, and VDOT generally does not seek to plant trees in the right of way because subsequent maintenance can be costly. Moreover, tree impacts are typically only assessed late in the process so that decisions on roads are made before impacts are known. VDOT's tree planting practices are expected to be updated as VDOT's Landscaping Guidance is being updated. While the county has policies that provide direction for tree planting, the county's policies do not specifically address planting to offset development and roadway (including the right of way) tree loss.

The County's priorities for planting in vulnerable communities and urban heat islands are outlined in the CECAP and Resilient Fairfax. The Natural Resources page on the [Climate Action Dashboard](#) provides additional information and goals. Two hundred thousand dollars was allocated from carryover funding in 2021 and 2024 to support tree planting for a total of \$400K through the Fund 30015 Environmental and Energy Programs under the Climate Implementation Program.

Fairfax County is the first county in Virginia to have a [Tree Preservation and Planting Fund](#) (TPPF), which is funded through developers that are not able to meet tree planting requirements. One goal of the TPPF is to prioritize tree planting efforts in areas that need it the

most, particularly in vulnerable communities and urban heat islands, areas that are often characterized by a higher concentration of impervious surfaces, fewer green spaces, and higher levels of pollution. The Tree Commission (TC) reported more than 100 trees were planted through the TPPF in 2022-2023 and more than 80 in 2023-2024.

As outlined in the TC's 2023 and 2024 Annual Reports, trees planted through the TPPF constituted a fraction of the over 16,000 trees TC reported. The percentage of these trees that were reported planted in high or very high vulnerability areas was 7 percent in 2022-2023. The tree plantings from the partner organizations and the staff prioritization of tree plantings in vulnerable populations in heat islands are a worthy start, but more can and should be done given the declining reported number of trees planted and low percentage of reported trees planted in vulnerable communities.

The recent enactment of House Bill 2630 provides an opportunity for Fairfax County to again provide a leadership role for the stewardship of trees. This Virginia law allows for a local ordinance to be adopted that shall require from 10 to 20 percent tree canopy per acre, depending on the density or use. While this law provides exemptions, it provides for a portion of the developer's tree canopy requirements to be met through off site plantings or replacement of trees at the direction of the locality. The bill also notes that a tree canopy fund may be established to collect, maintain, and distribute collected fees from developers. While this law is helpful, it does not fully replace tree canopy lost and may not be sufficient for the county to meet its tree canopy goals.

Recommendations:

EQAC recommends that the Board of Supervisors direct the County Executive to undertake an analysis to see understand the impact of planned development on tree canopy and ongoing efforts to plant more trees. Such an analysis should inform the county on the viability of attaining and maintaining the county's tree canopy goals. Moreover, the county should explicitly examine the opportunities for tree plantings in areas with vulnerable populations in heat islands, such as some mobile home parks. Given that the county is experiencing a reduction in the number of trees and the tree canopy, EQAC recommends that the Board of Supervisors also direct the County Executive to provide the Board options for a policy that would provide for tree plantings so that the county can meet its tree canopy goals. In addition, EQAC appreciates work that the county is undertaken and encourages the Board to continue to support the following actions:

1. EQAC strongly supports the work that the county has undertaken to plant trees and asks that this work continue and be augmented, especially in areas with vulnerable

populations and heat islands. [https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/environment-energy-coordination/sites/environment-energy-coordination/files/Assets/20241113_EQAC_Overview_Tree_Canopy_Presentation_A-1a.pdf]

2. The county should continue to prioritize tree plantings in areas with vulnerable populations in/near heat islands. Should plantings areas with vulnerable populations in/near heat islands not be an option, plantings in other heat island areas should be a priority.
3. The county should continue to highlight the many environmental and health benefits of tree plantings, as the loss of trees threatens the county's ability to meet tree canopy goals and their ability to mitigate the impact of heat islands, and improve the quality of life for residents, visitors and businesses.
4. The county should also encourage tree planting partners to prioritize tree planting in heat islands. However, should these partner organizations have other priorities, their priorities should be respected, as tree plantings anywhere is still almost always helpful.

Proposals for roads need to include information on tree loss so that the Board and communities appreciate the tree loss before a plan is accepted by the Board. Tree preservation options need to be known at the earliest stage of road construction projects.

Recognizing that the county's Department of Transportation maintains county roads, EQAC recommends that the Board direct the County Executive to ask that the Department of Transportation explore possible options to reduce tree loss and possibly plant trees that are removed during road construction when appropriate. Information on tree loss from county road projects should be shared with the community before project decisions are made. Information should include options to minimize tree loss and replace lost trees when feasible.

VDOT is in the process of developing Landscaping Guidance for their projects. We recommend that the BOS ask VDOT to include in their guidance the development of options to reduce tree loss and maximize the replacement of trees at the conceptual stage of projects. Such a provision will help to align road decisions with the Board's goals and reduce surprises for the Board and communities.

We thank you for your consideration of these comments and recommendations and hope that they will be helpful in supporting tree plantings in the county. As always, we welcome any questions.

cc: Bryan Hill, County Executive
Jennifer L. Miller, Deputy County Executive
John Morrill, Director, Office of Environmental and Energy Coordination (OEEC)
Christopher Herrington, Director, Department of Public Works and Environmental Services (DPWES)
Gregg Steverson, Director, Fairfax County Department of Transportation
Tracy Strunk, Director, Department of Planning and Development (DPD)
Bill Hicks, Director, Land Development Services (LDS)
Kirsten Munz, Director, Site Development and Inspections Division, LDS
Allison Homer, OEEC
Brian Keightley, Director, Urban and Community Forestry Division
Environmental Quality Advisory Council
Tree Commission

Environmental Quality Advisory Council (EQAC)
c/o Office of Environmental and Energy Coordination
12000 Government Center Parkway, Suite 533
Fairfax, Virginia 22035
Phone 703-324-7136 TTY: 711
www.fairfaxcounty.gov/eqac/