

Coalition to Advance Urban Forestry in San José

September 23, 2021

San José Mayor & City Council
City of San José
200 E. Santa Clara Street
San José, CA 95113

Dear Honorable Mayor and City Council:

Thank you for meeting with us concerning the initial draft of the San José Draft Community Forest Management Plan (Plan) which was described by the project funder, CAL FIRE, as “woefully underperformed”. CAL FIRE pointed out many omissions and deficiencies, including failure to meaningfully engage key stakeholders. Recently, a revised 95% version was released in August and, while many corrections have been made, **it still omits serious issues impacting our urban forest - issues that warrant attention and consideration.**

The fundamental issue that allowed these omissions to occur remains: the Draft Plan had no external stakeholder engagement process. The Draft is therefore incomplete, lacking in transparency, and incapable of guiding decision makers forward. Its limited scope and lack of inclusivity reflect the document’s focus on only the small portion of the urban forest within the City’s jurisdiction, rather than the entire urban forest that is mostly managed and financed by others.

As stated in our earlier letter, ownership and management of San José’s urban forest is the responsibility of many entities, and a solid plan for its future depends on engagement of these stakeholders. The vast majority of any urban forest - as much as 85% - is managed and financed by non-City entities. Street trees and park trees comprise the smaller portion, and in San José, even street trees are not the responsibility of the City, but of adjacent property owners. The cross-jurisdictional nature of urban forest management makes it imperative to have a stakeholder group representing many jurisdictions. In turn, implementation buy-in and investment is ensured.

The role of key external stakeholders, including the value of their impacts on environmental, economic, and health indicators, are mostly absent in the Draft Plan. These include Santa Clara County, Valley Water, Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority, Caltrans, San José Unified School District among other districts, major corporate landholders, and CAL FIRE itself. PG&E is also an impactful stakeholder due to its management responsibilities. This is a rare opportunity to create buy-in of best practices from entities with significant influence over a valuable asset we all share and benefit from.

As before, we implore you to address this matter by directing DOT to pause this process. We ask you to ensure the formation of a steering committee of independent and diverse external stakeholders to drive robust community engagement, bring in urban forestry experts, and steer the development of a true community plan that is visionary and state-of-the-art. This committee can use the Draft Plan as the starting point from which to draw in external stakeholder expertise and perspective and eventually expand and shape the Plan to reflect the needs of the entire urban forest and its stakeholders.

The recent scattershot community outreach approach by DOT that has occurred over the past three months to “just get it done” is simply not adequate—it’s way too little too late. They have merely sent out a detailed technical plan to thousands on various city mailing lists of both organizations and individuals, calling everyone a “stakeholder”, when these are not stakeholders with major asset responsibilities, expertise, and resources that can benefit San Jose’s urban forest. This approach hits far below any standard we believe San José should be willing to accept.

A key issue also inadequately covered in the 95% draft is San Jose’s tree inequity problem which is a crucially important environmental justice issue. Lack of tree canopy has a significant impact on human health and health equity and research has proven that the urban forest, in and of itself, is a public health tool. While some neighborhoods have a healthy tree canopy and benefit from cooler summer air temperatures, reduced air pollution, and decreased stress, others have a relatively sparse tree canopy and suffer from significantly hotter temperatures, high levels of air particulates and related disease, and depressed looking streets. While outside funders have done much to address tree inequity within San José, a lot more work needs to be done – and that work begins with the creation of an authentic stakeholder committee that will turn this draft into a plan with a *shared vision for all*, along with collaborative, SMART goals and strategies to achieve that vision.

San José deserves a plan that reflects the wisdom and availability of the immense expertise and resources all around us. By pulling together to tap these, San José can have an inspiring, cutting-edge community forestry plan that is also a climate action model for cities across the nation.

Thank you for your urgent attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Dave Cortese
California State Senator, Senate District 15

Linda J. LeZotte
Director, Valley Water and Former City of San José Councilmember

Vicki Moore
Chair, Santa Clara County Planning Commission

Bob Levy
Santa Clara County Planning Commissioner and Former City of San Jose Planning Commissioner

Michelle Yesney
Former City of San José Planning Commissioner; Former City of S.J. Director of the Office of Environmental Management; Former President, Greenbelt Alliance

Fernando R. Zazueta
Past President, La Raza Historical Society of Santa Clara Valley

Christina Egan
Volunteer Services Manager, Santa Clara Valley Medical Center

Barbara Marshman
Former Mercury News Editorial Page Editor

Nicole Kemeny
President, 350 Silicon Valley

Susan Butler-Graham
Team Coordinator, Mothers Out Front

Alice Kaufman
Director of Advocacy, Green Foothills

Justin Wang
Advocacy Manager, Greenbelt Alliance

Irma Balderas
Chair, Our City Forest Board of Directors

Rita Norton
Former Chair, SCVWD Environmental Advisory Committee

Gladwyn d'Souza

Chair, Conservation Committee, Loma Prieta Chapter, Sierra Club

Deb Kramer

Executive Director, Keep Coyote Creek Beautiful

Elizabeth Sarmiento

Board Member, Smart Yards Education

Peri Plantenberg

Coordinator, Silicon Valley Youth Climate Action



DAVE CORTESE
REPRESENTING SENATE DISTRICT 15

SILICON VALLEY
YOUTH CLIMATE ACTION



KEEP
COYOTE
CREEK
BEAUTIFUL



Coalition to Advance Urban Forestry in San José