CULTIVATING TREE ADVOCATES ON CITY COUNCIL

PlanIT Geo™
developers of TreePlotter

Having a tree advocate or two among government decision makers can be a game changer for a public urban forestry program.

Urban forestry programs often operate on tight budgets and urban forest managers must continually advocate for funding from internal and external sources. Having a supportive mayor, city council member, county commissioner, division supervisor, or any other role with sway over budgets and priorities, can make a huge difference in getting the staff and resources needed to grow a healthy urban forest.

Public and political awareness of the importance of trees has come a long way in the last two decades, but in many communities the benefits of urban forests are still unrecognized or underappreciated. Even when a government values trees, urban forest projects must compete with other public services from a general fund that is often stretched thin.

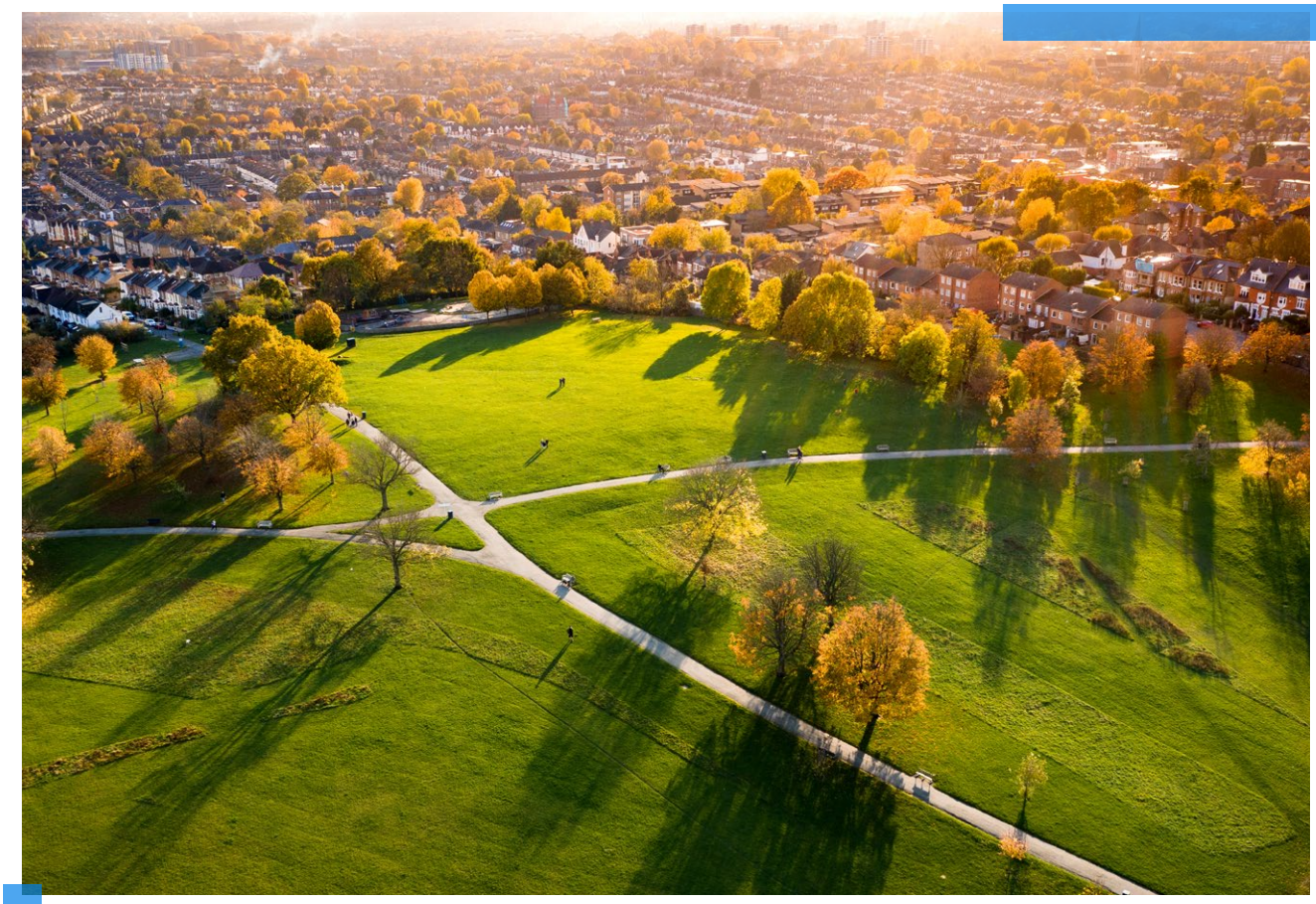
So, how do you turn those in charge into tree advocates? Make the benefits and risks of urban forestry real and relatable through canopy data visuals, inventory statistics, and urban forest management plan benchmarking. Reenforcing your messaging with numbers brings a measurable context to the conversation. Below, we've gathered lessons from urban forestry professionals who've used different types of data to grab attention and foster support from their government leaders.

CANOPY DATA STORYTELLING

Nothing sums up urban forestry talking points quite like urban tree canopy data. An entire city of trees can be condensed into a single percentage, i.e. Miami Florida has 25% urban tree canopy (UTC). That simplicity makes UTC ideal for goal setting. Government leadership can rally around a sticky target, like 30% canopy by 2030. In addition, the comprehensive nature of UTC makes it excellent for tracking large scale trends and measuring the effectiveness of urban forest management programs over time.

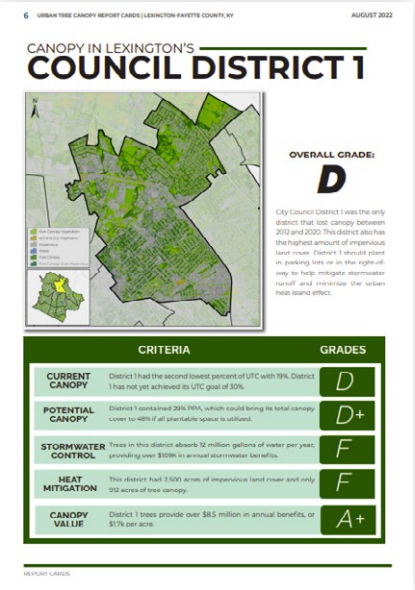
UTC data is exceptional at visualizing urban forestry trends over time. Showing a council member a map of red canopy losses in their district from new development is both compelling and easy to understand.

There are multiple methods for completing a UTC assessment that vary in scope, cost, and data output. The i-Tree Landscape and i-Tree Canopy are freely available tools for generating low-resolution canopy data for your community. Communities , like the case studies below, can also get detailed land cover data and urban forestry insights through a high-resolution urban tree canopy analysis. Thanks to AI and machine learning, this level of canopy data is now more affordable than ever, and can be updated as soon as new imagery becomes available.



LEXINGTON

When Lexington, Kentucky completed an urban tree canopy assessment in 2022, they had a unique strategy to help the results resonate with council members. They asked PlanIT Geo to develop report cards for all 12 council districts. The report cards scored 5 different canopy criteria and provided an overall letter grade. Urban forestry staff found that sharing a D- report for a council member's district was very effective for getting them interested and motivated in urban forestry efforts.

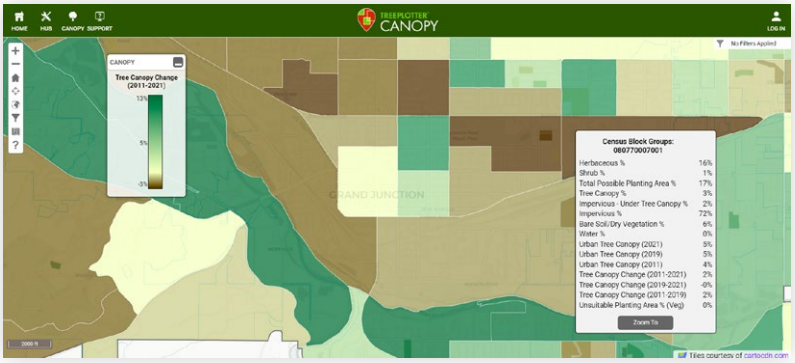


> It helps us talk to council members. They can have friendly competitions and it makes it easy for them to talk to constituents. It's been great to have these numbers and graphics, to show them, LOOK, your district really needs tree canopy, and here is where and why.
> **Heather Wilson, Program Manager Sr., Urban Forestry, City of Lexington**

GRAND JUNCTION

Like many municipalities, the urban forestry program of Grand Junction, Colorado operates on a tight budget. For Rob Davis, Grand Junction City Forester, this meant funding a traditional tree canopy analysis of the city's 17,000 public trees was an unlikely prospect. Through PlanIT Geo's annual canopy subscription service Rob was able to get recent and historical canopy data for the city, and it's adding an empirical backbone to his conversations with city leadership.

> Leadership within community forestry programs will always struggle to get outside agencies to buy into the value of trees without having canopy assessment data. It is too easy to be viewed as the "tree hugger" who is complaining about a few tree losses without data backing up the discussion. Having visual information, as well as data, documenting key aspects of how tree cover is changing in a community, and the services the resource is providing, moves the conversation into a discussion of reality versus feelings.
> **Rob Davis, Grand Junction City Forester**



LONGVIEW

The urban forest in Longview, Washington is approaching a tipping point. Street trees were planted en masse during the town's construction in 1923 and many of those 100-year-old trees are in decline and will soon need to come down. Longview's Parks Department is taking a proactive stance toward these looming changes by tracking its trees from the bottom up and the top down.

PlanIT Geo completed a street and park tree inventory in 2018 and an urban tree canopy assessment in 2022. Though the Parks Department currently has the resources and support they need, they see the canopy assessment as a proactive step towards future changes.

> **We weren't in a position where we needed a canopy assessment to justify something right now, but we got it so when that time comes, we have the information ready in our back pocket. We are ready if priorities or funding shifts as new members join the city council.**
> **Joanna Martin, Longview Parks & Urban Forestry Manager**

Canopy data also reinforces conversations with other city departments. The Longview Parks Department has frequent interactions with Public Works about infrastructure and trees. With canopy data in hand, Joanna is better prepared for conversations around sidewalk damage, trip hazards, liability, and finding the careful balance between risk and canopy preservation.

TREE INVENTORIES ANSWER KEY QUESTIONS

Canopy data excels at painting a comprehensive picture of urban forest trends. Tree inventories offer charts, graphs, and precise data points that allow urban foresters to ask and answer key questions. Beyond improving the management of trees, a tree inventory provides an abundance of statistics that urban foresters can use to contextualize their needs to municipal leaders.

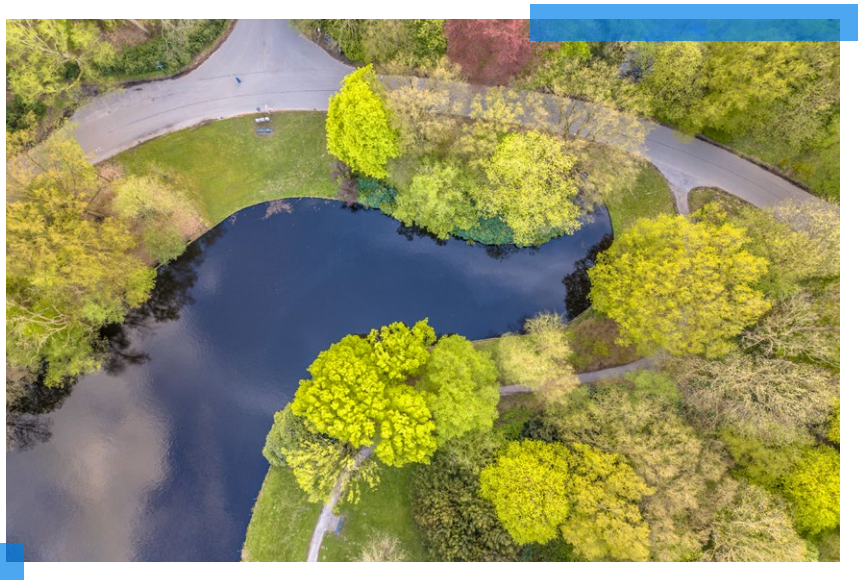
For Shannon Atencio, Las Vegas District Forester, a tree inventory has been a key tool for communicating the tenuous state of Las Vegas's urban forest. This decline is being documented in TreePlotter™ INVENTORY software to create reports and maps showing the condition of public trees to the city council.

> **In most cases, one is not dealing with biologists and natural resource specialists [on city council]. Charts and maps showing risk are a straightforward tool to show the urgency of the public safety problem. It also helps leadership understand the scale of funding required to mitigate the risk.**
> **Shannon Atencio, New Mexico State Forestry, Las Vegas District**

Las Vegas has also used volunteer field inventory days to engage community members in understanding why this resource is important. Once people go through this type of exercise, they look at trees, tree care, and tree benefits differently. These new urban forest advocates can then be allies in showing city officials that their constituents want investment in their trees.

ALIGN TREES AND TOP LOCAL ISSUES

For maximum impact, urban foresters should connect tree inventory insights to topical community issues. Maybe there's momentum around a carbon reduction target, and you can tout carbon sequestration stats of the city's trees. In this era of recording breaking summer temperatures, heat is an increasingly important issue to connect with trees.



That was the experience of Gabriela Lopez, Community Image Manager of the multi-jurisdictional board, Neat Streets Miami-Dade County. Miami was the first city in the nation to appoint a Chief Heat Officer to help protect residents from soaring heat and humidity. By stressing trees' heat mitigation abilities, Gabriela has garnered greater involvement in the county's heat mitigation meetings and can advocate for the urban tree canopy expansion goals of Neat Streets Miami-Dade County.

Gabriela also emphasized the importance of making an argument that comes down to dollars and cents about the benefit of trees. They found that demonstrating how tree inventories help obtain FEMA reimbursements post-storm or how residents can save money on AC with more shade trees was persuasive to government leadership.

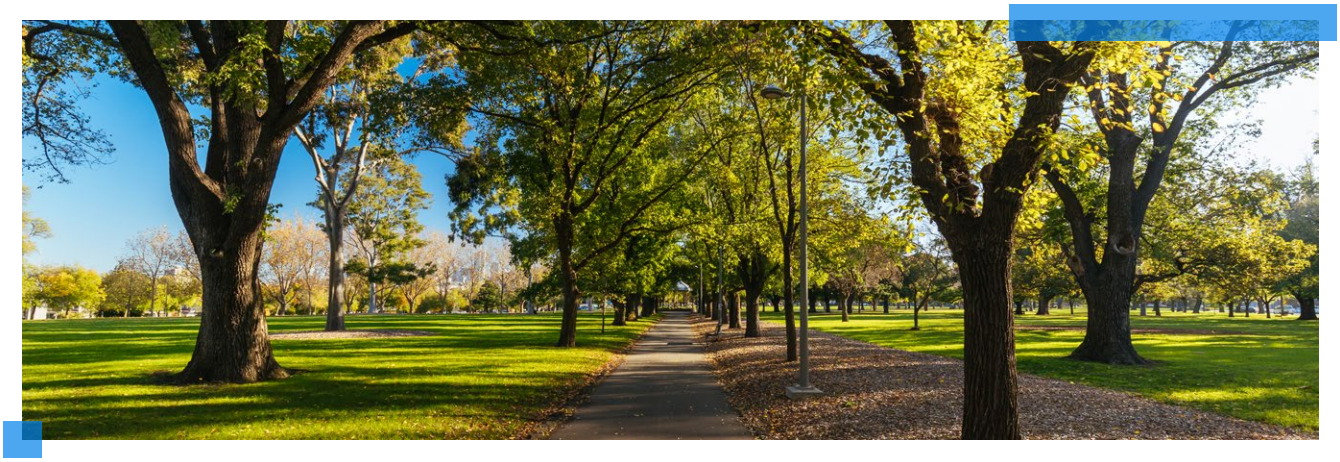
URBAN FOREST MANAGEMENT PLANS

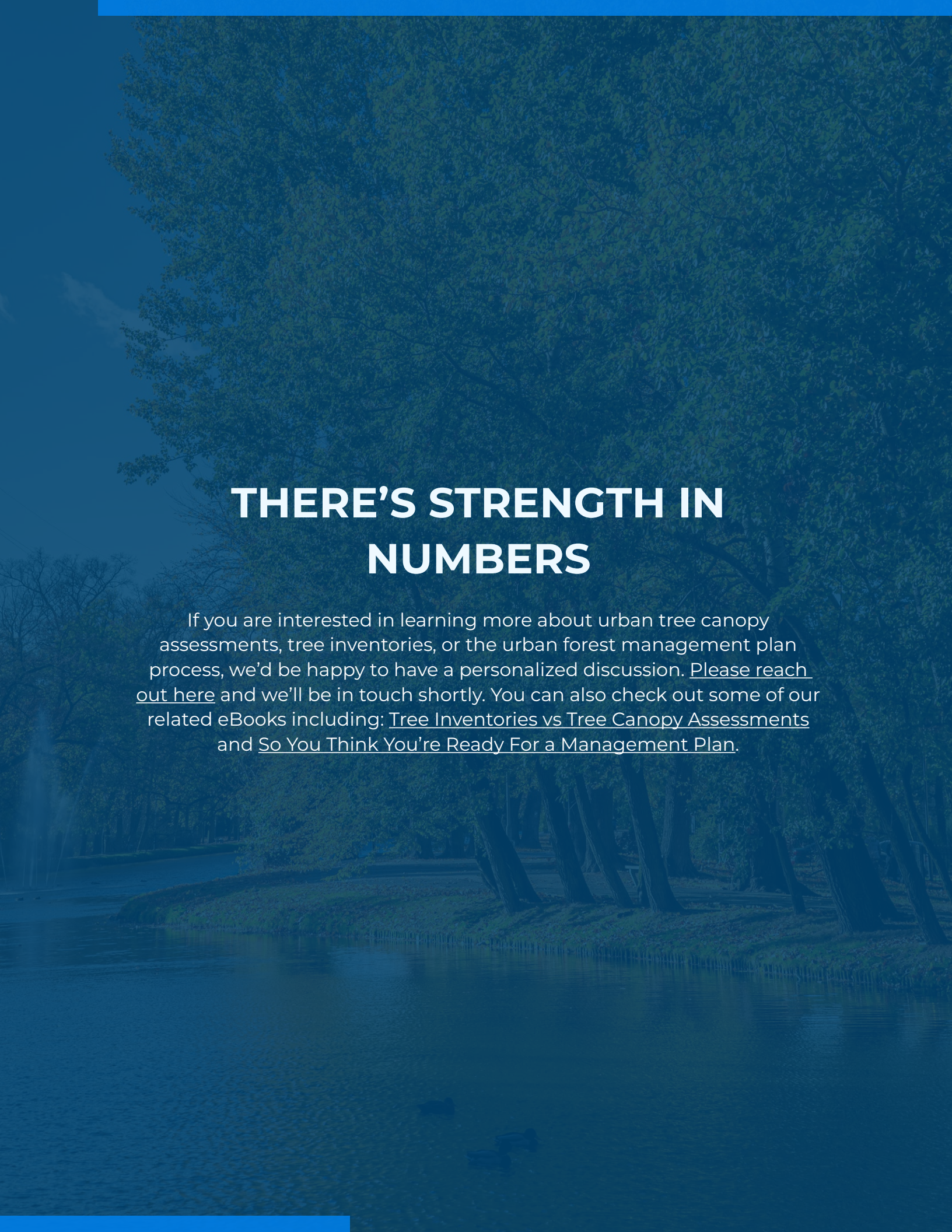
An urban forest management plan (UFMP) is a framework for ensuring your urban forestry program is moving in the right direction. It establishes a shared vision of what a community wants for their future urban forest and determines the goals, actions, and policies needed to get there. Creating a UFMP is a significant endeavor and requires financial and political momentum to get started, but once complete it can be a major asset when communicating with city officials.

That was the case in Colorado Springs. From 2019 to 2020, Colorado Springs conducted a canopy assessment, then a sample tree inventory, and then completed an Urban Forest Management Plan. Colorado Springs had an estimated public tree population of ~270,000 trees, so approximately 38,600 trees per year should have maintenance performed on them. However, Forestry staff had been able to maintain less than 1,700 trees per year, with another 2,000 with contracted services. The UFMP showed that compared to industry recommendations, City Forestry was understaffed by 16 employees and under-budgeted by $21.64 per tree.

In the two years since the plan's completion, the urban forestry department has shifted from Parks to Public Works, received a $200,000 budget surplus, and been able to hire five additional full time employees.

> **Our plan had a lot to do with it. I've been passing it around like candy and our new boss has been mining it for funding justifications. It has also caught the eye of a couple of new council members.**
> **Dennis Will, City Forester, Colorado Springs**





THERE'S STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

If you are interested in learning more about urban tree canopy assessments, tree inventories, or the urban forest management plan process, we'd be happy to have a personalized discussion. Please reach out here and we'll be in touch shortly. You can also check out some of our related eBooks including: Tree Inventories vs Tree Canopy Assessments and So You Think You're Ready For a Management Plan.