

Why are San Jose's trees disappearing? City loses hundreds of acres each year

January 12 2022, by Maggie Angst



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San Jose's trees are slowly vanishing.

Despite boasting, the nation's 10th largest city is in the midst of an

environmental crisis as the [tree canopy](#) that shades it has dwindled by 1.82% between 2012 and 2018.

That percentage may seem small, but consider that it represents 1,728 acres of public and backyard [trees](#), or the equivalent of 2.7 square miles, according to a recent analysis by the U.S. Forest Service.

That leaves only 13.5% of San Jose covered by trees, compared to 28% of Seattle, 27% of Boston and 40% of steel city Pittsburgh.

And in San Jose's poorer neighborhoods, the picture is even bleaker. Those areas have roughly half as much shade and greenery as the city's wealthier parts, the study found.

"I see this not just as an environmental injustice that has to be corrected but I see this truly impacting our mental health, education and everyday life," said Councilwoman Magdalena Carrasco, who represents East San Jose.

Trees offer a plethora of benefits, such as lowering temperatures, filtering the air, reducing flooding and providing shelter for seniors walking down a street and children playing tag. Those who live in areas with little tree coverage are more vulnerable to pollution, extreme heat and potential health problems, according to experts.

"If you're outside walking, jogging, playing, anything, you really want to be doing that where there are trees because otherwise, I like to say you're inhaling tires," said Rhonda Berry, CEO of Our City Forest, Silicon Valley's leading urban forestry nonprofit, which plants most new trees in San Jose. "To me, (trees) are like high-tech technology. They do it all."

San Jose City Arborist Russell Hansen cannot say for certain what happened to all the trees that are gone, though potential explanations run

the gamut from climate change to removal for property development to poor maintenance to insufficient planting.

A new, 242-page city report—the Community Forest Management Plan—reveals how decades of underinvestment and mismanagement led to the current state and warns that the damage could continue unless corrections are made.

Although the city's goal is to reach 20% tree coverage by 2051, it could drop below 10% by 2030 at the current pace, according to the plan.

"This downward trend in canopy cover will most likely continue if funding and management of the community forest continues at current levels," the plan says.

Approximately 40,000 trees would need to be planted to recover 1% of lost canopy cover, according to the report. The city set aside \$210,600 in this year's budget to plant 250 trees in city-owned park strips in East San Jose.

Compounding the problem is that almost 90% of San Jose's trees are on private property or in a public right-of-way and property owners are responsible for maintaining them. That means collaboration with partners like Our City Forest, school districts and residents will be integral to the city's success in reaching its goal.

Since 1951, San Jose has put the onus of maintaining "street trees"—those planted between a street and sidewalk—on property owners. Consequently, they have to pay for tree-related problems such as roots lifting up sidewalks and they can be cited for removing trees without a permit.

Jerry Flores, 70, recently received a letter from the city ordering him to

break up three patches of cement on his property, fill the areas with dirt and plant three trees. Flores, who lives in the city's Evergreen area, had removed a couple of trees on his property decades ago after one was hit by a car and another died. But the city just learned about the tree removal last summer when conducting a nearby inspection.

"I have no problem with the trees," Flores said after they were planted late last year, "but once they're there, they've got to be maintained and the homeowner is responsible. That's the problem."

Flores got the new trees for free thanks to a grant from Our City Forest but still had to come up with about \$1,900 for the cement work and dirt.

Carrasco, who has advocated for more tree planting and maintenance efforts in East San Jose, sees that as a problem.

"We have a policy that instead of incentivizing families, landlords, tenants, our residents to plant and maintain trees, we penalize them if there's any disruption to the infrastructure," she said in a recent interview. "So for a low-income family, that's not an incentive to plant a tree."

San Jose's Community Forest Program currently has a budget of approximately \$4 million, and the city's parks department—which maintains more than 30,000 trees—has just \$150,000 a year for tree services. To manage all of the trees on public property and right-of-ways, the program would need an additional \$20 million to \$24 million a year, the city estimates.

It didn't help that the city recently failed to take full advantage of a \$750,000 grant from Cal Fire that could have paid for a full public tree inventory. The city's transportation department left nearly \$460,000 on the table by failing to meet the grant requirements.

City transportation officials blame the COVID-19 pandemic, but some local advocates and conservationists are skeptical.

"It's very puzzling how this could have happened, especially since we're talking about this taking course over several years," said Vicki Moore, a longtime Santa Clara County conservationist. "In my mind, it just smacks of some lack of clear communication and maybe lack of oversight and overall management."

City officials like Hansen are recommending a broad range of policies and practices to begin tackling San Jose's tree loss.

Some cities like San Francisco have taken the rare step of caring for street trees. In 2016, voters there overwhelmingly approved a ballot measure to provide additional funding for [city](#) maintenance of all street trees, repairs of all tree-related sidewalk damage and liability coverage of people or property harmed by trees.

San Jose does not have any plans for a similar ballot measure, but officials say they'll ask the City Council to consider one in the future. They are also exploring a potential policy that would require any tree removed for maintenance or development to be replaced somewhere.

"Ultimately, this is going to be a big task for us," Hansen said. "But this management plan is really about studying where we're at currently and what we can do better."

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Citation: Why are San Jose's trees disappearing? City loses hundreds of acres each year (2022, January 12) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-01-san-jose-trees-city-hundreds.html>

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