Chicago says it's on track to plant 15,000 trees in first step to fix city's tree disparities

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About four days a week, Dulce Garduno picks a few blocks in the Little Village neighborhood and knocks on doors. If there's no response, she flags it as a house to revisit. If someone answers, she makes her pitch by

posing a simple question: Do you want a tree?

Garduno is one of several volunteers who are tree ambassadors, part of the [city](link)'s $46 million initiative, Our Roots Chicago, to plant 75,000 trees in five years.

"It was something I had to do," Garduno said. "Trees are something that you have to love, you have to care for, and now we have 250 new ones around here."

Chicago lags behind many other cities in overall canopy coverage, and over the years, has planted significantly fewer trees in lower income communities of color on the South and West sides, a Chicago Tribune investigation found.

Last year, the Lightfoot administration announced it would prioritize planting trees in historically marginalized and underserved communities and launched Our Roots earlier this year.

According to city spokesperson Mimi Simon, the city has planted more than 14,000 trees so far and expects to meet this year's goal of 15,000. When asked where the trees had been planted, Simon said the city will release those demographics at the end of the planting season.

Tree ambassadors and environmental advocates say progress has been made. But some criticized communication with the city, the speed and diversity of plantings and outsize expectations for volunteers. The real test, however, may be how the trees are maintained over the next three years, a crucial period for the survival of young saplings.

"You can make buildings fast," Garduno said. "But the trees need time, water, light and care. These are the things that we have to do."

Naomi Davis is the founder and CEO of Blacks in Green, an organization that advocates for building sustainable green communities in West Woodlawn. She said planning for tree care is just as important, if not more important, than planting the trees.

For example, the Chatham neighborhood used to have a rich, full canopy, but the trees were cut down by the city and not replaced as they aged, Davis said. "If you look at a woman with a glorious head of hair, that was Chatham," she said.

Now, the community faces worsening problems with flooding and erosion, Davis said.

Davis calls Our Roots' goal of planting 75,000 trees a start.

"But it does not begin to put a dent in the kind of reforestation that's going to be needed, especially in Black and brown communities, to counteract the heat island effects and the need for beauty, and the need for the serenity that trees can provide to our consciousness," she said.

In addition to plantings and ambassadors, Our Roots Chicago created a tree equity working group that includes more than 70 people from a variety of organizations and sets long-term goals for addressing tree disparity and climate change.

Research shows trees help deflect the warmer, wetter effects of climate change in the Great Lakes region. Fewer trees in neighborhoods can mean hotter temperatures, more flooding and pollution, and higher electric bills.

The city's half-million street trees, those often found on the strip of grass between roadways and sidewalks, make up a part of the overall canopy coverage, along with trees in parks and yards. But Chicago parkways

have lost more greenery in the past decade than they've gained due to disease, pests, conflicting budget priorities and a confusing 311 request system. In the past decade, there has been a net loss of 69,000 street trees, according to city records.

Conservation group Openlands, a member of the working group, has volunteers called TreeKeepers who are trained in tree care. The group leads other initiatives that also count toward the city's 75,000 goal when they include trees planted on the public parkway.

According to Michael Dugan, director of forestry at Openlands, the benefits of trees grow "exponentially" with each passing year.

"Planting a tree today in front of your parkway or at your house is probably the No. 1 thing you can do to start to create a more climate resilient neighborhood for you, your neighbors, your family," he said.

But this payoff comes with a lag. In fact, the main thing a newly planted tree brings is work. For the first three summers, trees need consistent watering for their roots to establish.

"Growing in an urban environment, sort of every aspect that a tree helps us out with, whether its air pollution or summer cooling, that's also a stressor on that tree," Dugan said.

Because a young sapling will not provide the same value as a large tree during the lifetime of most adults today, Dugan said, stewarding new trees and protecting big trees is equally important as planting.

"We can't plant ourselves out of it," he said.

Tree ambassadors

Garduno, who is originally from Mexico and lives in Pilsen, became a tree ambassador after the city invited Mi Villita Neighbors in Little Village to join its tree equity working group. She wants to help the Pilsen and Little Village neighborhoods, where the 31st Street industrial corridor contributes to high levels of air pollution.

Through the training in June, she learned how to identify parkways best suited for trees, and how to explain the benefits to her neighbors and show them how to navigate the 311 process for requesting a tree.

Some common misconceptions that tree ambassadors aim to dispel are that tree roots can break pipes or crack sidewalks, and that branches can be dangerous to homes and property. Some of these myths are rooted in a "bad history" of planting trees over old infrastructure, leading to issues for the homeowners, Dugan said. But engagement through the ambassadors can emphasize that trees are "appreciating assets" with health and ecological gains, he said.

Garduno said she has submitted more than 300 requests for trees and estimated 90% of the residents she has engaged with agreed to having a request made on their behalf for a parkway tree.

Sara Hou, tree planting program manager for the Chicago Muslims Green Team, said her organization is working with Islamic centers and mosques in Pilsen and Bronzeville to train residents how to canvass.

"If you're knocking on people's doors and asking them to get trees planted, they're more open-minded or wanting to listen to you if you're also from the same neighborhood," she said. Hou plans to attend a tree ambassador training session this weekend.

"The city expects the number of trees planted through the tree ambassador program to grow as the community outreach work continues

in the coming years," Simon said in a statement.

Tree ambassadors speed up the 311 planting process, which is normally first come, first served. Requests from tree ambassadors receive priority, said Raed Mansour, director of environmental innovation at the Chicago Department of Public Health and one of the leaders of the tree equity working group.

Normally after the city receives a request for a tree, residents have to wait for someone to go to the site, speak with the resident and approve it. Instead, tree ambassadors narrow down viable requests and help the city prioritize areas with fewer trees.

Volunteers in Pilsen and North Lawndale were also trained in the program, Mansour said.

"We hope this spreads word-of-mouth to get information about trees to neighbors that extends out, so that we can get more people engaged in understanding the benefits of trees," he said.

Reshorna Fitzpatrick, pastor of the Stone Temple Baptist Church, participated in the North Lawndale tree ambassador training, with the goal of planting 7,000 trees in her neighborhood. Fitzpatrick said she's witnessed several plantings this season on Douglas Boulevard and always tries to document the moment.

"If I catch a tree planter planting trees, I'm taking pictures," she said, with a laugh.

Risa Prezzano, a web developer and data analyst who lives in Little Village, was excited to become a tree ambassador when she heard about Chicago's initiative to plant 75,000 trees. Through a TreeKeeper training course she took with Openlands in 2021, she learned about

environmental justice and the health concerns of communities with higher levels of pollution.

"Now, I can't stop looking at it everywhere," she said. Especially through the trees.

The city began planting trees for Our Roots on Arbor Day. Tree planting is divided into two seasons, with the spring planting season beginning April 1, and the fall planting season beginning Oct. 1. The timing of each season varies based on weather and ground temperatures. This year, planting began again in early October, and the city aims to continue as weather permits.

But Prezzano's initial excitement for Our Roots is waning, and she said she has "mixed feelings" about the program. "I still do think it has great potential, and I don't think it should stop," she added.

The community engagement work of Our Roots is placed disproportionately on volunteers, Prezzano said. "It shouldn't have to be someone who's giving up their free time to try and make this happen."

Prezzano said she believes the city needs to engage more directly with residents rather than just leaving a printed notice on a doorknob.

"They're doing what they need to do on the logistical side, but when it comes down to it, a tree equity program deals with people, and you still need to work with people," Prezzano said. "You can't erase that part."

The notice, or door knocker, is written in English and Spanish. It states that the city has planted a tree on the parkway by the resident's home and provides instructions for aftercare. When Prezzano found a door knocker on her own knob, she said it looked "like a parking ticket."

The notice includes the message, "Like any good neighbor, please look out for the new tree. Protect it from vandalism, lawn mowers, weed whips and vehicles." Residents are also asked to water the tree weekly.

Another challenge, Hou said, has been that some neighborhoods with low tree canopy, such as industrial areas like Pilsen, have less available space for parkway trees.

"There is some inequity within the way streets are laid out compared to areas on the North," Hou said. "Not every home has a grass strip in front of it."

Plantings and maintenance

Chicago's trees are planted by Seven-D Construction Co., a vendor the city has contracted for plantings since at least 2015. Seven-D is required by its contract to have a certified arborist on staff, according to Simon, the city spokesperson.

Openlands has planted trees in Chicago alongside Seven-D for years now, but some members said they are concerned about how the initiative is being executed and whether Seven-D's contract with the city covers all of the plantings and maintenance necessary.

As trees go into the ground, Citlally Fabela, a forestry program coordinator with Openlands and member of the working group, said they've noticed on some blocks, the same tree species was planted in a row, or the city planted a species that is already overplanted.

Simon said the Bureau of Forestry works to achieve systematic diversity in planting by alternating groups of different types of trees down a street.

"Species adaptation to urban site conditions can at times be more critical

than diversity," Simon said in a statement.

She said residents can also specify the kind of tree they want when they make the 311 request, which "allows residents to help develop the character of their own neighborhood."

Some trees may not be planted immediately. Mayoral hopeful Ald. Raymond Lopez, 15th, tweeted in October that hundreds of young trees had been sitting unplanted in a city-owned storage lot in his ward for months while his constituents reported 311 requests for trees going unanswered.

Seven-D uses the lot at West 46th Street and Damen Avenue for trees waiting to be planted, according to its contract with a city.

Seven-D Construction did not immediately respond to requests from the Tribune for comment. Simon said the vendor, "likely has trees on site for other customers" and that the city's Bureau of Forestry verifies trees have been planted properly before paying for any trees.

Daniella Pereira, vice president of community conservation for Openlands, said these trees can survive the winter unplanted if they are kept balled up in burlap and mulched to prevent the roots from freezing. What she said she is more concerned about is that Seven-D's contract may not cover all the costs of ensuring the trees survive their first couple of years.

Pereira worries that the trees may not receive adequate watering, which is "the best thing anyone can do for a tree," she said. The contract states that Seven-D is responsible for watering through the plant establishment period but does not specify regularity.

Simon said maintenance schedules are at the discretion of the vendor,

and watering is dependent on the environmental conditions, such as how often it rains. "The onus is on the tree vendor to water the tree to avoid replacing the tree should it become unacceptable as per the contract," Simon said in the statement.

She noted that the city is in the process of finalizing "a new tree vendor contract" to go into effect in the coming months.

The health of the trees planted this year can't be estimated until next season, Pereira said.

"The best time to really look at that is spring next year," she said. "If trees don't bud and don't leaf out, then we'll know a little bit more about how successful some of those planted this year will be."

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