Planning for Urban and Community Forestry

The American Planning Association, in close collaboration with the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) and American Forests (AF), will prepare a state-of-the-art best practices manual about how urban and community forestry can best be integrated into long-range and current municipal planning activities in the U.S.

This $240,000 project is made possible by $120,000 from the USDA Forest Service and matching funds from the three partnering organizations. The project began in January 2006 and is scheduled to last 24 months.

The primary audience for the manual will be:

- urban planners working for municipalities or working as consultants to municipalities;
- planning commissioners and planning board members;
- city and town managers;
- city and town public works, engineering, and parks department managers;
- municipal arborists and urban foresters;
- developers and those in the design professions serving them.

The manual will take the form of a Planning Advisory Service (PAS) report, which will be distributed to members of the Sustainable Urban Forests Coalition and more than 1,350 planning agencies and consultants nationwide. Individual copies of the manual will be available from APA's online Planners Book Service and from project sponsors.

The Problem of Declining Urban Forests

Urban forests provide enormous environmental benefits — among them improving air and water quality and slowing stormwater runoff. Yet, tree canopy in many U.S. metropolitan areas has declined significantly over the last few decades. The national organization American Forests has analyzed tree cover in more than a dozen metropolitan areas and documented changes. Over the last 15 years, naturally forested areas of the country east of the Mississippi River and in the Pacific Northwest have lost 25 percent of their canopy cover while impervious surfaces increased about 20 percent. Theses changes have ecological and economic impacts on air and water systems. Communities can offset the ecological impact of land development by utilizing the urban forest's natural capacity to mitigate environmental impacts.

The physical framework of a community is called its infrastructure. These utilitarian workhorses of a city can be divided into two types: *green and gray*. Green infrastructure includes areas covered with trees, shrubs, and grass; gray infrastructure refers to areas of buildings, roads, utilities, and parking lots. A community can measure the size, shape, and location of its green infrastructure and accurately calculate the public utility functions these areas perform.

For local public policymakers responsible for decisions affecting urbanization, the problem is not solely about getting the city or the developer to plant more trees. It is far more complex, involving every aspect of the urbanization process and balancing gray and green infrastructure. While both gray and green infrastructure are important in a city, communities that foster green infrastructure wherever possible are more livable, produce fewer pollutants, and are more cost-effective to operate. However, balancing the gray with the green can be a serious challenge.

Up until now, there has been no guidebook or manual that provides a clear path to such an understanding. This project addresses the need for planners to adopt a green infrastructure approach and the technical means to incorporate trees into planning. Moreover, the creation of such an urban planning manual will help urban forestry professionals and advocates understand how they might best interface with the urban planning process to maximize green infrastructure and reduce gray infrastructure costs.

Urban planners, and those in allied professions with whom they often work, are uniquely positioned to influence public policy affecting how the built (gray infrastructure) and natural environments (green infrastructure) are planned and designed to work together.

Planners have an opportunity to advocate for maximizing green infrastructure in a number of ways. These strategic points of opportunity are best employed at two scales of land planning:

1. Adopt a Green Infrastructure Approach to Plan Making

- *Community Visioning*, or the development of long-range goals and objectives for the community, which all too often do not include reference to trees or green infrastructure.

- *Long-range plan-making*, including preparation of:
    - the comprehensive plan (known in some states as the general plan or master plan);
    - sub-area plans, such as neighborhood plans, corridor plans, downtown or central business district plans, or redevelopment plans;
    - functional plans, such as plans for parks and open space, transportation plans (highway, transit, bikeway, and pedestrian plans), community services, and facilities plans.

2. Implement Best Management Practices that Promote Green Infrastructure

- *Preparation of ordinances, regulations*, *and incentives* affecting the siting of buildings, sidewalks**,** curbs and gutters, roadways, drainage, landscaping, and other physical features, using zoning, subdivision control, and site planning requirements.
- *Review and approval of applications for development*, which includes scrutiny of plans for:
    - residential subdivisions;
    - planned unit development;
    - mixed-use developments;
    - redevelopment of blighted areas;
    - street, sidewalk, and bikeway improvements within public rights-of-way;
    - landscaping plans and plans for neighborhood parks and play lots;
    - community services and facilities plans;
    - urban design plans for streetscapes, plazas, and other public spaces.
- *Preparation of capital improvements programs*, which involve the identification, costing, scheduling, and specification of major public capital investments, such as roads, parks, and municipal facilities.

Goals

The following goals will be advanced by this project:

- Provide the rationale and economics of adopting a green infrastructure approach to planning
- Provide guidance on the principles and practice of sound urban and community forestry to a broad set of professional and lay public officials at the local level;
- Strengthen the relationship between urban planners, urban foresters, water quality and stormwater managers, and professional arboriculturists.
- Provide an opportunity to exchange knowledge between urban and community forestry partners and urban planners, including allied professions such as landscape architecture and the environmental community.