Urban Forestry Committee Minutes
September 10, 2026 – 4:00 p.m.

City of Grand Rapids
Grand Rapids Public Service Center – 1500 Scribner Ave NW
Room 2106

Committee Members Present:
Tommy Allen, Dan Chase Max Gibbs, Cindy Irving, Geoff Kempter, Becky Pobst, Joe Sulak, Annabelle Wilkinson, Jonathan Wilson

Others present: Christy Brunsell, Nick Hitchcock, Michelle Slykhouse (City staff)

Mission:
To provide guidance to the City Commission and City staff to promote and maintain a vibrant and healthy urban treescape and canopy for citizens of Grand Rapids.

Agenda:

1. Call to Order: 3:03pm

2. Determination of Quorum

3. Approval of Agenda
   Motion made by Jonathan Wilson, supported by Max Gibbs, to approve the agenda as presented. Motion carried.

4. Approval of Minutes from the June 11 meeting
   Motion made by Jonathan Wilson, supported by Max Gibbs, to approve the minutes as presented. Motion carried.

5. Public Comments – none

6. Old Business
   - Tree awareness items and communication

   Tommy asked for committee members who haven't picked a favorite tree yet to do so at this meeting. Discussion took place regarding trees that would be appropriate for planting near utilities. Geoff stated the Katsura tree would be a good option. Jonathan stated he would use the Katsura tree as the tree species to feature. Annabelle stated the Horse Chestnut is her favorite tree.

   Christy stated the goal of each UFC member having a favorite tree identified is so that each month a tree spotlight can be done on social media to bring awareness around the benefits of trees. Christy asked that committee members send information to her about 1) why they are involved on the Urban Forestry Committee and 2) some details about why the tree is their favorite. Christy will get some social media posts ready after having this information.

Discussion took place regarding fall being a good time for tree planting and to be aware of how far away from the house a tree should be planted. Christy stated she will work with Friends of Grand Rapids Parks on some posts about which trees are good to plant in fall and which ones are better to plant in spring. Becky stated she also has some information that can be shared on social media regarding tree pruning – for trees that are best pruned in the winter it is advised to put ribbon on branches now (while the foliage is still on the tree) in order to know where to prune later.

- Mayors' Monarch Pledge

Tommy provided background information regarding the Mayors' Monarch Pledge and stated that a proclamation by the Mayor was needed in order for Grand Rapids to receive the designation so a presentation by John Ball Zoo was given to the UFC and members at that time supported the initiative.

Geoff asked how the Mayors' Monarch Pledge supports trees. Tommy stated its sustainability and pollinator habitat. There are multiple action items municipalities need to do for the designation, and a lot of those items correlate with the UFC and is work the city has been or is planning to do already.

Motion made by Jonathan Wilson, supported by Max Gibbs, to remove the Mayors' Monarch Pledge item from the agenda until there is new business to discuss at such time the item can be placed on the agenda in new business. Tommy asked how to ensure the item will come back up when necessary. Jonathan stated if there is already a subcommittee involved then a city staff member will bring it up to be added again when appropriate. Motion carried.

7. New Business

- Tree inventory components and timeline

Joe stated that a smart inventory is being considered for the new tree inventory data. The process would use ground based LiDar and the following will be identified: geolocation, tree species, size including height, crown width, percent die-back, leaf area index, Ecosystem services, lean angle, overhead & adjacent conflict as well as several street level photos of the individual trees. In addition, A digital twin of the tree will be created that can be manipulated as part of the software package. It is anticipated that the Request for Proposals (RFP) will go out towards the end of October or in November. Joe stated several Michigan municipalities have recently completed the same type of inventory.

Tommy asked how the other agency paid for their inventory. Joe stated it was a line item in their budget. Funding for the updated street tree inventory is not itemized in the current budget but will be pulled from the Parks Fund Balance once proposals are evaluated. Geoff stated that an inventory is typically updated on a regular basis and for Grand Rapids' data being 10 years old means a lot has changed. Inventory helps with

knowing where resources need to be spent. Joe stated the tree data has been and is still being updated in GIS as Forestry crews and Contractors complete work. GIS data also includes tree planting locations.

Cindy stated that dollars for ongoing software subscription (annually) will be needed to maintain the data. Cindy asked how much will need to be invested annually after the inventory is done. Joe stated the RFP will ask for software details and the cost of software.

Geoff suggested asking about utility presence during the inventory.

Cindy stated it could be possible to discuss with Public Works about putting equipment on their trucks, that drive streets every week, to keep data updated after the inventory is done and any new software is put into place.

Becky asked whether there is potential to have the data be public facing at all once the inventory is complete. Joe stated he does not have that specified in the RFP at this time.

Tommy asked whether other departments would benefit from the tree inventory data and if there could be a cost share.

- Tree Manual & Standards of Practice

Nick stated the Tree Manual & Standards of Practice (Manual) is to be reviewed and updated (as necessary) annually in January by the UFC. Nick stated this has not been done since 2024 and would like to get updates done this year (January 2027).

Nick stated that after he reviewed the Manual, there are a few things that will need to be updated 1) links used in the document need to be changed due to the City's new website launch that happened in Spring 2026, 2) underground utilities and size of tree planting, 3) there is nothing regarding trees in tree wells in the current Manual.

Nick stated the Manual references an invasive species list but the City does not use an invasive species list, rather a prohibited species list is used and referenced. Geoff recommends changing the terminology from invasive to prohibited.

Nick would like to add some text to the Manual so that people who are found responsible for intentionally damaging a tree are then financially liable for the cost to remove and replace the tree. Tommy asked about the value of the tree being included in the financial responsibility rather than just the cost to remove and replace. Nick stated this can come into play if someone is being prosecuted (value of tree). The cost to remove the tree and replace is typically not included and is currently just handled by City staff. Cindy recommends talking to Code Compliance about any new fees before incorporating into the Manual.

Cindy stated the Manual references vegetation management but there are other types of tree related items to manage (mats, etc.).

Motion made by Max Gibbs, supported by Jonathan Wilson, to create a subcommittee to work on the update. Geoff volunteered to be on the subcommittee. Motion carried.

8. Partner Reports

- City of Grand Rapids

Nick stated there were multiple small storm events throughout the summer and due to this standard proactive work is delayed.

There is an Oak Wilt outbreak at the City's Lake Michigan Filtration Plant.

Annabelle stated discussion with external partners is starting up regarding the Climate Action Plan and the UFC was brought up as a potential external partner. Annabelle requested a presentation to the UFC be placed on a future agenda.

Cindy stated Public Works has a composting project going on right now. Focus on planting the right tree in the right place continues with multiple departments. There are concerns about tree grates. There is heaved concrete in front of City Hall due to trees that were planted there (wrong type of tree for the place). As part of this project, different types of trees will be put back, with the City Forester's approval of what tree species to plant.

- Friends of Grand Rapids Parks (FGRP)

Becky stated Fall planting season events start Saturday downtown. Neighborwoods will be held the end of September in the Garfield Park area this year. There will be 219 trees planted as part of this event. Free tree giveaway (residents can plant the tree in their yard) will be available this year during Neighborwoods.

A BioBlitz event was hosted at Riverside Park with over 200 people attending.

Tree watering will continue throughout this month and maybe into October, depending on weather.

- DTE Energy

Jonathan stated emergency work and public improvement project work continues. Jonathan brought brochures for a natural gas program.Will not be able to attend October meeting and will try to get any suggested edits to the Manual back to Nick before the November meeting.

9. Agenda Items for future meeting
    - Zoning change and effect on canopy
    - Tree manual & standards of practice – January approval

10. Adjournment – 4:43 pm

Next meeting scheduled for Thursday, October 8, 2026 – 4:00 p.m.
at Grand Rapids Public Service Center, 1500 Scribner Ave NW