

Action memo

How the City of Oakland can plant more trees

Oakland is losing trees every year, and we need to plant a lot more to meet the goals laid out in the City's 2024 Urban Forest Plan. This memo contains twenty five recommendations for the City to improve tree care and planting.

These recommendations came out of a coalition of over ninety volunteers, community-based organizations, and government agency staff. Our coalition formed because we noticed that many of us faced the same logistical and bureaucratic hurdles when it came to planting trees, and we wanted to find ways to share resources, streamline maintenance, and facilitate a greener city. We met from May 2025 to February 2026, breaking into committees on urban forest expansion, community outreach, permitting, tree care, and technology.

The attached chart identifies the specific obstacles faced by community organizations, volunteers, and property owners when trying to plant trees in West Oakland. It's intended to provide City departments, agencies, and decision-makers with a clear, implementation-ready set of actions to expand Oakland's urban forest.

Please reach out to Brie Martin at bmartin@woeip.org with questions.



About the West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project

The West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project (WOEIP) is a resident led, community-based environmental justice organization. For over twenty years, we've been working for healthy homes, healthy jobs and healthy neighborhoods for all who live, work, learn and play in West Oakland, California.

Our mission is to build grassroots capacity to sustain local leadership for positive change. Our work aids residents in understanding the political, social, and natural forces that impact their lives. We give impacted residents the tools to participate in these processes and to drive change from the bottom.

Learn more at woeip.org.

Notes on the action memo

Recommended City actions are shaded where solutions are similar or overlapping.

Policy change refers to policy change in two or more City departments. Difficulty increases with more interdepartmental coordination.

For \$\$\$ *required*, 0 represents use of current staff time, without additional hiring or systems upgrades.

This work was made possible through a Sustainable Transportation Equity Project (STEP) grant funded by the California Air Resources Board (CARB). The West Oakland STEP grant aimed to improve transportation equity in West Oakland by centering the community's lived knowledge and expertise in transportation projects. STEP is part of California Climate Investments, a statewide initiative that puts billions of Cap-and-Invest dollars to work reducing greenhouse gas emissions, strengthening the economy, and improving public health and the environment — particularly in disadvantaged communities.

Policy and planning

How to expand eligible tree planting sites

| Barrier | Description | Agency or institutional lever | Recommended City actions | Staffing increase | \$\$\$ required | Timeframe | Policy change | Political feasibility |
|---|--|--|---|-------------------|-----------------|---|---------------|---------------------------------|
| Curb cut, utility and street sign planting distance requirements | Uniform distance rules unnecessarily limit planting | Public Works (PW) - Tree services, OakDOT, EBMUD, PG&E | 1) Develop species-specific clearance standards (height and canopy) allowing reduced setbacks for appropriate trees. 2) Align distance requirements with other cities that prioritize tree planting | No | 0 | Less than 6 months | No | High (<i>already started</i>) |
| Existing tree wells are undersized | Retrofitting wells is costly, slow and environmentally harmful (concrete goes in landfill) | PW - Tree services, OakDOT | 1) Develop species-specific size standards allowing reduced tree well size for appropriate trees. 2) Plant shrubs using Oakland Adopt a spot program | No | 0 | Less than 6 months | No | High |
| City site surveys are complex and highlight multiple constraints | Existing requirements disqualify many viable planting sites | PW- Tree services | Review the site survey checklist and identify constraints that can be waived or simplified for certain tree species | No | 0 | Less than 6 months | No | High |
| Tree well minimum sizes (3x3) are too large for many sidewalks to meet 48" ADA rules. This 48" clearance is not as cut and dry as sometimes suggested | Dimensional standards block planting on many blocks | PW- Tree services; Tree planting permitting requirements | 1) Pilot variances to allow for smaller or longer tree wells where they cannot be as wide that match existing legacy space (concrete poured for tree wells prior to current standards). 2) Alternative designs for legacy sidewalks where ADA access is preserved (e.g., smaller or modular tree wells). 3) Consult with ADA advocates or attorneys to better understand if there is flexibility to 36" | Possible | \$ | Over 6 months (some coordination required). | Yes | High |



Action memo: How the City of Oakland can plant more trees

From the West Oakland Tree Stewardship Coalition

Policy and planning

How to expand eligible tree planting sites (continued)

| Gap | Description | Agency or institutional lever | Recommended City actions | Staffing increase | \$\$\$ required | Timeframe | Policy change | Political feasibility |
|--|---|---|--|-------------------|-----------------|---|---------------|--|
| Lack of alternatives in the instances where trees cannot be planted due to regulatory constraints | Missed greening opportunities | PW- Tree services, OakDOT; Landscape and right-of-way standards | 1) Authorize native shrubs, rain gardens, or groundcover as approved alternatives where trees are infeasible; sites follow the same ownership pathway as tree stewardship. Create Permitting requirements for such plantings. | No | 0 | Over 6 months (some coordination required). | No | High |
| Property owners unwilling to assume liability | Liability concerns deter participation, plantings | City risk management and property policy | 1) Clarify liability protections and develop standardized agreements to reduce owner risk. 2) Research a city insurance coverage for privately maintained street trees | Unclear | Possible | Over 6 months (some coordination required). | Yes | Mixed- good for homeowner, bad for City's budget |
| Limited native species on Approved Street Trees list | Only ~7 of ~50 approved species are native | PW- Tree services; Approved Tree Species List | City staff to document criteria and initiate a formal process to add native trees. This will be in the purview of the Urban Forest Plan Implementation Team when staffed | Yes | 0 | Less than 6 months | No | High |
| Unclear pathways for tree planting at under-utilized medians. Median size/type vary widely. City concern over safety of volunteers crossing the street to perform work | Range of medians: A) have capacity but no trees, B) have dysfunctional/ nonexistant irrigation systems, C) need a planter installed (only painted line), D) medians that are too narrow | DOT. Adopt-a Spot. OPW (Parks= medians, Trees= trees) | 1. City/Adopt a spot to allow volunteers to work in these areas, which includes the ability to install or fix irrigation systems and release from harm forms. 2. Create a streamlined option for planting groups to permissions to put in irrigation. 3. DOT to install planters as needed (could be done as streets are paved) and remove stumps, or possibly coordinate with Trees for Oakland, so medians are prepped | Possible | 0-\$ | Ongoing | Yes | High |

Operational issues

How to coordinate and expand capacity

| Gap | Description | Agency or institutional lever | Recommended City actions | Staffing increase | \$\$\$ required | Timeframe | Policy change | Political feasibility |
|--|--|---|--|-------------------|-----------------|---|---------------|------------------------|
| Insufficient capacity for site assessments | Too few staff or contractors can complete assessments | OPRF, PW – Tree services; City staffing and contracting | Expand use of trained contractors or community partners/volunteers for preliminary site assessments | Yes | \$\$ | Over 6 months (some coordination required). | No | High (already started) |
| Slow permit processing (4–8 weeks) | No dedicated staff to review permits in City of Oakland – permitting delays stall planting schedules | PW, Permit review workflows | Establish expedited or batch permitting for standard tree planting cases | No | 0 | Less than 6 months | Yes | High |
| Unclear entry point for requesting a tree | Residents face confusing pathways | City communications systems / web team | 1) Short-term: on City of Oakland Tree Services page, link to current non-profits (ie Common Vision) that are doing intake for tree planting grants. 2) Long Term: when OUFP begins, link to a separate webpage with routing logic by property and site type. Publicize the change on Instagram, Next Door and other media | No | 0 | Less than 6 months | No | High |

Operational issues

How to coordinate and expand capacity (continued)

| Gap | Description | Agency or institutional lever | Recommended City actions | Staffing increase | \$\$\$ required | Timeframe | Policy change | Political feasibility |
|--|--|---|--|-------------------|-----------------|---|---------------|-----------------------|
| Inconsistent public messaging | Weak motivation to participate | PW – Tree services, OPRF; City communications | 1) On City of Oakland Tree Services page, make visible the language that is in the Urban Forest Plan, which explains the benefits of trees, linking trees to heat reduction, health benefits, and cost savings. 2) Publish regular newsletter updates or blog posts to the website to keep the community engaged, and allow community members to sign-up for a mailing list to receive additional updates about ongoing projects | Possible | 0-\$ | 1) Less than 6 months. 2) Ongoing | No | High |
| Unclear City prioritization strategy | Residents unclear how decisions are made regarding tree planting | PW- Tree services; City communications | When OUF 2024 begins, document and publish on city webpage how canopy, heat, and equity data inform planting priorities. This information is currently in the Urban Forest Plan report | No | 0 | Less than 6 months | No | High |
| No easy way for community to identify open street tree planting or replacement sites | Opportunities go unreported | GIS and reporting systems; web team | Integrate with current public facing map the ability to tag empty wells or dead trees. Model this after NYC (https://tree-map.nycgovparks.org/) or use Tree Plotter geospatial platform for tracking information about individual trees. Add a plaque with a number to each tree that corresponds to a tree in the database | Possible | \$\$ | Over 6 months (some coordination required). | No | High |

Structural issues

How to plant more trees in more places

| Gap | Description | Agency or institutional lever | Recommended City actions | Staffing increase | \$\$\$ required | Timeframe | Policy change | Political feasibility |
|---|---|--|--|-------------------|-----------------|---|---------------|-----------------------|
| Vacant lots with absentee owners (that are often used as illegal dumping sites) | No clear authority on who, if anyone, can plant | Keep Oakland Clean, OPRF; Property and code enforcement | 1) City to create vacant lot owner contact list for outreach. 2) Potential "Adopt a Lot" program a la "Adopt a Spot" with resident volunteers | Possible | 0-\$ | Over 6 months (some coordination required). | 1) No. 2)? | High |
| Difficulty accessing water | Irrigation infeasible at many sites | Water utility; EBMUD; PW - Tree services (watering trucks) | 1) Work with EBMUD and City to explore opportunities. 2) Provide shared resources and support to organizations that are hand-watering this area. Provide threshold for amount of watering to provide access to shared watering resources | No | 0-\$ | Over 6 months (some coordination required). | 1) Yes. 2) No | Neutral |
| Difficulty accessing equipment for watering | Residents lack tools to sustain trees | OPRF; City operations and partnerships | Create a shared equipment or tool-lending program for watering and maintenance integrated onto city webpage. If Adopt a Spot is already using this, coordinate with them | No | 0-\$ | Over 6 months (some coordination required). | No | Coordination required |
| Lack of quality nursery stock | Supply limits scale | OPRF with General Services; Procurement policies | Contact local nurseries them to let them know what Oakland needs; see about leveraging the power of scale to influence quality | No | 0-\$ | Over 6 months (some coordination required). | No | High |
| Illegal dumping | Dumping prevents planting | Keep Oakland Clean; Property and code enforcement | Coordinate with the City's illegal dumping lead (Rebecca Kaplan) to prioritize greening and cleanup at planting sites | No | 0 | Over 6 months (some coordination required). | No | High |

Program governance

How to coordinate Oakland's tree planters

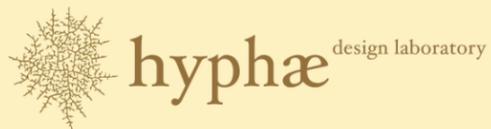
| Gap | Description | Agency or institutional lever | Recommended City actions | Staffing increase | \$\$\$ required | Timeframe | Policy change | Political feasibility |
|---|---|---------------------------------------|--|-------------------|-----------------|---|---------------|-----------------------|
| Volunteer and steward roles unclear | Inefficient use of labor | OPRF; Program governance | Define and document roles for stewards, volunteers, and workforce partners | No | 0 | Less than 6 months | No | Yes |
| No volunteer or stewardship tracking system | Hard to manage coverage and follow-up | OPRF; City data systems | Select and pilot a shared volunteer/steward tracking tool. Use Airtable or Google Sheets on the backend to track and manage the volunteer list, tree maintenance logs, and tree care | No | \$ | Over 6 months (some coordination required). | NO | Neutral |
| Unclear post-grant leadership | Risk of program collapse after grants end | OPRF; City designation of lead entity | Identify a long-term convening body and formalize responsibility through MOUs | No | 0 | Over 6 months (some coordination required). | Yes | Coordination Required |

Community-based tree care

How to empower local communities to steward trees

| Gap | Description | Agency or institutional lever | Recommended City actions | Staffing increase | \$\$\$ required | Timeframe | Policy change | Political feasibility |
|--|--|---|--|-------------------|-----------------|--------------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| Unclear entry point for stewardship of trees | Residents face confusing or absent pathways | PW-Tree services OPRF; City communications systems | On City of Oakland Tree Services page, add language that explains the benefits of trees and shows stewardship options and links to partner organizations | No | 0 | Less than 6 months | No | Yes |
| Unclear maintenance support for residents | Homeowners do not know whom to contact with issues | PW-Tree services; Interdepartmental coordination | On City of Oakland Tree Services page, link to a separate webpage with clear point of contact | Possible | 0-\$ | Ongoing | No | High |
| Unclear information on how to care for new trees | Residents face confusing or absent care pathways | PW-Tree services, OPRF; city communications services. | On City of Oakland Tree Services page, link to a separate webpage with a maintenance guide by location or tree type | Possible | \$ | Less than 6 months | No | Yes |

This action memo was made possible by:



and the participants in the West Oakland Tree Stewardship Coalition.

