Green Ribbon Committee
Tree Canopy Subcommittee
Recommendations to the City Council

Introduction

Increasing tree canopy and achieving the environmental, economic, and coastal resilience benefits of an increased tree canopy is an established priority of the Virginia Beach City Council. To further progress toward the 45% tree canopy goal, the Green Ribbon Committee convened a subcommittee tasked with reviewing current municipal landscaping requirements and opportunities. Over a multi-month review process, this committee evaluated systemic gaps in our practices and policies, analyzed emerging urban forestry data, and aligned local policies with newly enacted state statutes. The following actionable recommendations provide a framework to optimize opportunities to increase tree canopy on both public and private land in Virginia Beach.

I. Adopt a City Code Change

Adopt an ordinance providing for the planting and replacement of trees during the development process pursuant to the provisions in 15.2.961 and 15.2.961.1. This new authority was allowed for local adoption through House Bill 549 that was passed in the 2026 legislative session and signed into law, taking effect July 1, 2026.

II. Modernize the Landscape Management Guide

The current Landscape Management Guide used by the Planning Department to prescribe landscape requirements for greenfield, infill, and redevelopment projects was last updated in 2002. Many City priorities have changed and evolved in the past twenty-four years, including increasing our tree canopy, addressing our flooding challenges, and improving energy efficiency. Good landscaping practices can positively impact these city priorities.

We recommend that the Virginia Beach Landscape Management Guide and associated sections of the City Code be comprehensively reviewed, revised, and brought into conformity with modern urban forestry practices and standards. This update should reflect the City's strategic priorities by incorporating the following:

- Review the planting requirements for each project type to aggressively encourage stormwater best management practices, including rain gardens, bio-retention, buffers, and the use of native plant species.

- Equate minimum planting requirements to canopy levels and establish a period of time allowed to reach that goal. Twenty years is recommended as a maximum.

- Allow design flexibility to create optimum growing conditions for the trees.

- In establishing tree canopy requirements, follow the guidelines established in 15.2.961 and 15.2.961.1, matching them to our zoning categories to the greatest extent possible.
    - Ten percent tree canopy for a site zoned business, commercial or industrial.
    - Ten percent tree canopy for a residential site zoned 20 or more units per acre.
    - Fifteen percent tree canopy for a residential site zoned more than 10 but less than 20 units per acre.
    - Twenty percent canopy for a residential site zoned more than 5 but not more than 10 units per acre.
    - Twenty-five percent tree canopy for a residential site zoned more than two but not more than five units per acre.
    - Thirty percent tree canopy for a residential site zoned two or fewer units per acre.
- Require that a certified International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) arborist be actively embedded in the initial planning and design stages of every municipal public works and capital improvement project. Involving professional arborists can ensure the protection of mature, high-value public trees, prevents utility trenching through critical root zones, and avoids expensive and unnecessary tree removal and replacement.

- Allow existing trees which are to be preserved and protected during the development process to be included to meet all or part of the canopy requirement. Establish adequate protection procedures.

- Establish a schedule for regular updates to the Landscape Management Guide.

- Update the recommended plant list to prioritize native species and species diversity, as well as an enforceable prohibited list that includes invasive and disease-prone species.

- Establish a regular schedule for updating the plant list.

- Work with the Department of Parks and Recreation, Landscape Management Division to develop citizen-focused communications and terminology. Eliminate the use of “Urban Tree Canopy” in community facing communications. Many Virginia Beach residents do not identify with living in an urban area but think of their neighborhoods as suburban or even rural. The City should develop practical language centered on “growing our tree umbrella” or “expanding neighborhood shade network” or even “expanding our tree network”. This simple shift helps ensure that municipal communications are practical and inclusive, fostering stronger citywide cooperation and voluntary participation for private landowners.

III. Establish a City Tree Planting Grant Program

To scale up tree planning efforts on private property, which constitutes the majority of the city's landmass, the City should establish and implement a tree planting grant program available to homeowners' associations, civic leagues, faith communities, and non-profits to create more opportunities for tree planting on private property throughout the city. This grant program will be funded by the mitigation payments currently required for tree removal by city departments and other funds paid to the city in mitigation for tree removal.

This grant program will give the City more flexibility to plant trees on land that is not owned by the city and increase our tree coverage in a meaningful way. Guidelines will need to be developed for the grant program including:

- Department of Parks and Recreation, Landscape Management should establish canopy goals for each land-use and area of the city that will, if achieved, get us to an overall canopy of 45%.
- Clear objectives of the grant program need to be determined and established.
- Eligibility should be open equally to all homeowners' associations, civic leagues, faith communities, and qualified 501(C)3 organizations. No single entity shall be granted exclusive management or principal access to these funds.
- Priority areas can be established by current tree canopy data, gaps between current and desired tree canopy, and heat island data.
- Guidelines for the use of the funds should be carefully developed. The City may want to look at the Virginia Department of Forestry grant programs as a model.
- An accepted species list should be established and prioritize native species and species diversity.
- A category for care of older mature trees to extend their life time could be included in the grant.
- All grant recipients must provide a maintenance and care plan to cover a minimum period of three years.
- A reporting process should be established as part of a grant recipient's responsibilities.

The grant program should be developed and managed by the Department of Parks and Recreation, Landscape Management Division.

Individual members of the Green Ribbon Committee are interested in assisting with the development of the grant program and the full Green Ribbon Committee would like to review the completed grant program proposal.

IV. Include in the 2027 State Legislative Agenda

We respectfully encourage the City Council to support a current Department of Environmental Quality initiative examining the relationship between tree preservation and stormwater management. The initiative would build upon extensive research conducted by Dr. Daniel McLaughlin and his team at Virginia Beach regarding the role of urban forests in stormwater attenuation, evapotranspiration, water quality, and overall watershed health. A primary objective of the initiative would be to evaluate whether the preservation of existing mature tree canopy should be recognized as a Best Management Practice (BMP) within Virginia's stormwater regulatory framework and BMP Clearinghouse. While current regulations provide stormwater credit for newly planted trees and a variety of engineered practices, they generally provide limited or no credit for preserving mature trees that are already providing substantial stormwater, water quality, and evapotranspiration benefits.

Recognizing tree preservation as a BMP could create a meaningful incentive for developers and builders to retain exiting mature canopy rather than clearing sites and replanting trees that may require decades to provide comparable environmental benefits. Such an approach could improve watershed outcomes, reduce the need for engineered stormwater infrastructure, enhance community and environmental resilience, and support the Commonwealth's broader environmental objectives. It would also encourage a more holistic approach to land development – one that recognizes the environmental value of existing natural systems before relying solely on engineered solutions.