



September 13, 2021

Letter sent by Milwaukee Water Commons to all members of
the Milwaukee Common Council

Dear Alderman _____,

Major storms continue to highlight the urgency of rethinking how we invest in climate resilience. As you begin the process of determining the City of Milwaukee's next annual budget, we urge you to increase the budget allocated to the City Forestry Division. Doing so would not only protect against storm damage, but also deliver multiple environmental, public health, and economic benefits for the people of Milwaukee.

This August, Milwaukee was hit by another front of high winds and intense rain that demonstrated how underprepared we are to deal with a changing climate. Across the City trees damaged by the storm fell into houses, cars, and power lines, causing significant damage and leaving families to deal with extreme heat and basement backups without power for days. For years Milwaukee residents have persevered through these storms, as scientists have continued to caution that they would increase in frequency and in intensity. **It is time that our budget reflected the urgency of taking proactive steps to prepare for, and manage the consequences of, the major storms that we must anticipate as part of a changing climate.**

In 2019, the Branch Out Milwaukee Campaign released a [report](#) highlighting the need for cross sector partnerships and shared strategies focused on growing and maintaining Milwaukee's tree canopy. This report, informed by over 30 organizations working in Milwaukee, highlights the benefits that trees have on public health, water quality and flood prevention, job creation, heat reduction, and air quality. The report also calls out the need for more coordination and funding to ensure that trees are planted equitably and maintained so that all neighborhoods feel the benefits of trees rather than the detrimental consequences of no trees or poorly maintained trees.

The City of Milwaukee's canopy has faced previous challenges that can inform our choices today. In the 1950-60's the City was removing around 10,000 Elm trees annually due to the impact of Dutch Elm Disease—a tree disease that rapidly spread across the city. As trees were removed, there was also a growing need for new trees and professionals to plant and maintain them. The impacts of canopy loss due to Dutch Elm Disease were substantial, accounting for an estimated \$44M in lost stormwater management services, \$73.7M in lost air pollution mitigation services, \$27.2M in lost energy saving services, and \$8.25M in lost carbon sequestration/storage benefits between 1956 and 2013 ([Sivyer et al., 2016](#)). Though new trees were planted, there are major disparities in tree cover around the city and, though the tree care industry has grown, it has still not been able to meet the demand for tree care in Milwaukee.

Today, the City of Milwaukee's canopy faces new threats. A 2014 assessment suggested that there were eight known pests within Milwaukee County. The most significant of these is the emerald ash borer, an insect which threatens to eliminate up to 16% of Milwaukee's total canopy. To manage the impact of the emerald ash borer, the City and County are injecting trees with protective chemicals and staggering their removal of the trees to limit the impact of tree loss and prioritize the removal of trees that threaten public safety.

The need to control these pests adds to the demands placed on tree care professionals in addition to tree planting, maintenance, and pruning. With both the frequency and intensity of major storms growing due to climate change, these jobs are even more critical and demanding. Trees on streets, parks, and private property need to be planted strategically to ensure they are resilient during major storms or high winds, watered, and monitored for damage or hazards.

In 2019, the year that the [Branch Out Milwaukee Campaign report](#) was released, the City of Milwaukee projected that it would conduct pruning on 23,000 trees throughout the year, however pruning operations were only reported on 14,352 trees. This exemplifies a trend since 2017, when pruning operations were expected to handle 32,000 trees but fell short at 24,000. The 2020 and 2021 proposed budgets have only set the expectation of 19,500 trees undergoing pruning operations each year.

The responsibility for this drop-off in operations does not fall onto the forestry division or on the arborists working daily around the city. **Each year since 2016 we have seen a drop off in funding for the City's Forestry Division and a drop in paid positions.** In 2019 the forestry division lost 12 full-time arborists, 28 in 2020, and at least 27 in 2021. Similarly, in the early 1970s Milwaukee County Parks employed over a thousand full-time staff, but by 2017 around 200 people oversaw all park programs.

Today Wisconsin is the only state in the country where the tree care industry has become a certified trade. Anyone eighteen years of age or older can pursue an [apprenticeship as an arborist](#), or connect to Milwaukee's [Northcott Neighborhood House](#) to gain skills through an arborist pre-apprenticeship program with connections to local tree care businesses. **Investments in tree care utilizing this pathway could be an opportunity for our city to create access to living wage employment across the city, while simultaneously preparing our communities for major storms by ensuring that our canopy is properly managed and that residents have healthy relationships with healthy trees.**

In the scope of five to ten years, partners engaged with the Branch Out Milwaukee Campaign hope to see systems change, heat islands addressed, improved air quality, canopy coverage goals met, invasive species controlled, equitable distribution of trees and green spaces, and paid pathways into the tree care industry. Arriving at that vision will take consistent investments and intention. "To account for our history, and move forward equitably, we will need to move forward together."

Sincerely,



Kirsten Shead
Co-Executive Director
Milwaukee Water Commons



Brenda Coley
Co-Executive Director
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