



Tree Preservation Ordinance Public Input Group Final Work Product – Updated November 2025

The Tree Preservation Ordinance Public Input Group (TPO PIG) convened neighbors, neighborhood associations, local advocates, and residents with technical expertise to strengthen Saint Paul's approach to protecting urban trees during development and public projects.

Guided by principles of equity, transparency, and practical implementation, the group met seven times between May and November 2025 to provide focused input on ordinance language, identify critical gaps, and develop actionable recommendations that balance ecological health with community priorities. The TPO PIG also presented updates and recommendations to the City of Saint Paul Parks and Recreation Commission, and the Ward 2 office engaged District Councils in the fall to incorporate neighborhood perspectives ahead of the ordinance's anticipated return to City Council on December 10, 2025.

Throughout these discussions, the TPO PIG emphasized clear, enforceable language that eliminates ambiguity, promotes early and accessible public engagement, and focuses on protecting trees on city-owned land—including boulevards, rights-of-way, parks, and trails—while anticipating future phases to address private property protections. Members highlighted the importance of specifying project applicability, clarifying enforcement roles and contractor responsibilities, defining critical terms, and ensuring replacement requirements advance equity, environmental justice, and public health goals.

Key themes emerging from the group's work include:

- **Clarity and Strength:** Use prescriptive, binding language with strong enforcement and accountability measures.
- **Early and Inclusive Planning:** Require tree preservation plans to shape project design from the outset and ensure meaningful, accessible public input.
- **Balance and Flexibility:** Ground core protections in the ordinance while allowing expert-driven rulemaking for technical detail.
- **Transparency and Trust:** Foster open communication through multilingual notifications, clear timelines, and visible oversight.
- **Equity and Environmental Justice:** Prioritize canopy protection and investment in the least-canopied, heat-vulnerable, and historically disinvested neighborhoods.
- **Full Lifecycle Stewardship:** Emphasize preservation, maintenance, replacement, and long-term establishment to secure lasting urban canopy health.

These recommendations reflect a shared vision for a well-managed, equitable, and resilient urban forest that enhances quality of life for all Saint Paul residents and supports the city's climate goals.

The TPO PIG offers this work to inform ordinance revisions, guide SOP development, and support City Council decision-making on this critical city-wide issue.

If you have any questions about the information presented in this document, please contact Megan Jekot, Legislative Aide to Saint Paul City Council President Rebecca Noecker, at megan.jekot@ci.stpaul.mn.us

Overview of TPO PIG Meetings and Presentations

- Meeting #1 (May 28): Launched the group, gathered initial input, highlighted gaps, and discussed early draft ordinance language based on the January proposal and public comments received.
- Meeting #2 (June 30): Held an in-depth discussion with Third Horizon consultants, identifying key opportunities and areas of concern.
- Introductory Presentation to City of Saint Paul Parks and Recreation Commission (July 10)
- Meeting #3 (July 15): Focused on debriefing Parks Commission feedback and organizing ideas into core topics or “buckets” for deeper exploration.
- Meeting #4 (July 24): Finalized and prioritized the thematic “buckets” to guide ordinance drafting and identified key next steps to carry the work forward ahead of August 27.
- Meeting #5 (August 11): Reviewed and discussed the finalized TPO PIG work product to guide detailed recommendations ahead of the August 27 City Council meeting.
- Meeting #6 (October 21): Reviewed the City’s October 17 draft ordinance, evaluated how prior PIG recommendations were incorporated, and identified areas needing clarification to guide ongoing ordinance and SOP development.
- Meeting #7 (November 3): Addressed key legal, procedural, and implementation questions on the draft ordinance and SOPs, clarifying applicability, enforcement, contractor accountability, replacement, equity, and public notification.
- Update Presentation to City of Saint Paul Parks and Recreation Commission (November 13)
- Introductory Presentation to Mayor’s Advisory Council on Disabilities (November 18)

District Council Engagement on the TPO

As part of the Tree Preservation Ordinance drafting process, the Ward 2 office sent two email invitations this fall to all District Councils. For those councils that responded, the office scheduled time at one of their standing meetings to provide a brief overview of the work completed to date and to gather resident input on priorities for the ordinance ahead of its return to City Council on December 10, 2025. These conversations ensured that neighborhood perspectives were incorporated into the ongoing development of the ordinance.

On the following page is a record of District Council meetings attended, including dates of engagement and any related recordings, provided as links.

DATE	DISTRICT COUNCIL	W2 STAFF IN ATTENDANCE
September 11	Summit Hill Association	Council President Rebecca Noecker
September 29	Highland District Council	Council President Rebecca Noecker
October 13	West 7 th / Fort Road Federation	W2 Legislative Aide Megan Jekot
October 27	West Side Community Organization	Council President Rebecca Noecker
October 28	Payne-Phalen Community Council	W2 Legislative Aide Megan Jekot
November 5	Como Community Council – link to recorded presentation	Council President Noecker & W2 LA Jekot
November 13	Macalester-Groveland Community Council	Council President Rebecca Noecker
November 17	Union Park District Council & Hamline Midway Coalition – link to recorded presentation	Council President Noecker & W2 LA Jekot
November 18	Capitol River Council	Council President Rebecca Noecker
November 19	Greater East Side Community Council – link to podcast recording	Council President Rebecca Noecker
November 24	Southeast Community Organization	Council President Rebecca Noecker
January 8 (scheduled)	St. Anthony Park Community Council	Council President Rebecca Noecker

Overview of TPO PIG Members & Meeting Attendees

Name	Org/Connection	5/28	6/30	7/15	7/24	8/11	10/21	11/3
Bridget Ales	Save Our Street & Pedestrian Advocate	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Lindsey Alexander	Third Horizon Consultant	-----	X	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
Stacy Becker	Third Horizon Consultant	-----	X	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
PJ Bensen	Community Member	X	Excused Absence	X	X	X	X	X
Tom Darling	Summit Avenue Residential Preservation Association	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Noah DeVlaminick	Community Member	X	X	X	Excused Absence	X	X	X
Meg Duhr	Fort Road Federation	X	X	X	X	X	X	Excused Absence
Tim Greenfield	Saint Paul City Council – Chief Policy Officer	-----	-----	X	X		X	X
Julian Hartland	Student at Macalester College, Sunrise Movement Organizer, & Union Park District Council Community Engagement Associate	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	X
Sean Kershaw	Saint Paul Department of Public Works - Director	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	X
Theresa Paulson	Saint Paul Parks & Recreation Commission	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	X	Excused Absence
Michael-jon Pease	Saint Paul Parks Conservancy	X	X	X	X	X	Excused Absence	X
Colleen O'Connor Toberman	Friends of the Mississippi River	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Jacob Walls / Dan Reed	Ramsey Hill Association	X - Met 5/27		X				

Fall Updates Following Final Work Product Draft – October & November 2025

OCTOBER 21

The Tree Preservation Ordinance Public Input Group (TPO PIG) reconvened on October 21 to review and discuss the City's working draft of the Tree Preservation Ordinance, received on October 17. This meeting focused on evaluating how the draft aligned with the group's previously submitted recommendations (see "Final Work Product – August 2025" below), identifying areas needing clarification or revision, and understanding the relationship between the ordinance text and the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) expected by the end of the year.

Members recommended adding explicit language recognizing the public health benefits of tree canopy to strengthen the draft ordinance and reflect the City's responsibility to protect health, safety, and welfare. The group noted that the draft required clearer guidance on applicability, including which projects are covered—such as utility work, private entities operating in City right-of-way, easements, and overlapping jurisdictions—and stressed the importance of specifying responsibilities for preservation, replacement, and associated costs.

Key definitions, including "construction," "impact," "bid letting," and "critical root zone," were identified as needing refinement to ensure clarity, biological accuracy, and enforceability. Members also raised concerns about compliance and enforcement, noting that the draft did not clearly outline enforcement roles, penalty assessment, appeals processes, or contractor liability. They recommended explicit contract language requiring private contractors to cover replacement and maintenance costs and urged the City to clarify enforcement procedures within the ordinance itself.

On replacement requirements, members emphasized equity and environmental justice, calling for off-site planting priorities when in-place replacement is not feasible, guidance to ensure replacements enhance canopy rather than simply meet one-for-one offsets, and clear rubrics for prioritizing planting locations. The group requested defined criteria and approval processes for variances and exemptions, particularly for narrow boulevards or utility conflicts.

Participants expressed concern about the proposed June 30, 2026 effective date, noting the potential for projects to be expedited to avoid compliance. They recommended the City provide a clear rationale for the effective date and implement safeguards around retroactivity and grandfathering. The group also highlighted the need for stronger transparency and accountability, including public-facing project information, equitable notice standards, compliance tracking, and consistent communication with residents to rebuild trust.

Equity and environmental justice were noted as areas that need more explicit attention in the draft, with members urging clear connections between mitigation and replacement requirements and canopy equity, public health benefits, and historically disinvested neighborhoods.

Overall, while the October 17 draft shows progress in several areas, members identified critical issues needing further discussion, including definitions of critical root zones, enforcement mechanisms, applicability to utility and multi-jurisdiction projects, and retroactivity. The group reaffirmed that the final ordinance, together with SOPs, should reflect Saint Paul residents' commitment to the city's urban tree canopy, the work of the Public Input Group (PIG), and the City's goals for transparency, accountability, and environmental justice. Coordination with Public Works, Parks, the City Attorney's Office, and Third Horizon at the November 3 PIG meeting was recommended to address these outstanding questions.

NOVEMBER 3

The TPO PIG reconvened on November 3 to address key legal, procedural, and implementation questions related to the City's working draft of the Tree Preservation Ordinance and associated Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). The meeting focused on clarifying ordinance applicability, enforcement, and accountability, confirming next steps leading to Parks Commission review on November 11, and preparing for the ordinance retuning to Council at the December 10 meeting.

Saint Paul's Director of Public Works, Sean Kershaw, attended the November 3 meeting and provided updates on the draft ordinance timeline, noting that the preliminary version for the November 11 Parks Commission meeting would be more detailed than previous drafts, though not final.

Members reviewed how feedback from the October 21 draft review had been addressed or planned to be addressed in the draft ordinance and SOPs. For ordinance clarity and applicability, the group confirmed with Director Kershaw that the ordinance applies to City right-of-way projects, utility work, and easements, with limited small-scale or short-term maintenance projects following contractor best practices rather than full tree preservation plans. Responsibility and cost-sharing principles were clarified as well: contractors are liable for tree damage, penalties apply directly to them, and subcontractors are accountable under the main contractor's obligations. Definitional clarity was discussed, including refinement of terms such as "construction," "critical root zone," "damage," and "tree impact zone," with critical root zone now defined by trunk diameter at 4.5 feet and soil language removed to allow for areas under sidewalks. Applicability to certain transit projects remains under review with the City Attorney.

On enforcement, penalties, and contractor accountability, Director Kershaw noted that City Forestry staff, supplemented by certified outside arborists, will oversee compliance. Penalties will be flexible and contractually enforceable, calculated using standardized tree replacement cost formulas. SOPs will provide detailed guidance for monitoring and compliance, while the ordinance will specify key accountability touchpoints. Transparency through public-facing compliance tracking was emphasized by the PIG to ensure contractor adherence and public oversight.

For replacement, equity, and public communication, PIG members discussed offsite planting planning to avoid overcrowding, using the updated Urban Tree Canopy Study to guide prioritization. Consideration of climate justice, resilience, and equity policies—such as tree watering and maintenance in neighborhoods with high rental populations or low canopy coverage—was highlighted in the discussion. Public notification strategies, including yard signs, QR codes, and collaboration with District Councils, were once again encouraged by the PIG to ensure early, inclusive, and coordinated community engagement.

Regarding effective date, retroactivity, and implementation, the group reviewed the June 30, 2026 effective date, which applies to projects put out for bid after that date. Director Kershaw explained the rationale is to allow ongoing projects in planning to proceed without undue rush. The ordinance fully includes mill and overlay projects, while minor maintenance work is excluded unless it impacts tree roots or sidewalks. Rollout considerations discussed included staffing, training, and phased implementation to ensure enforceability and practicality.

The meeting concluded with confirmation of next steps: integrating clarifications into the next draft, preparing roles and materials for the November 11 Parks Commission meeting, confirming feedback deadlines for the December 10 Council review, and addressing outstanding questions regarding SOPs, contractor accountability, and public engagement strategies. Remaining gaps identified by the PIG included early public notification, SOP details for tree replacement and maintenance, and ongoing monitoring and reporting mechanisms.

Key questions for follow-up with City staff and consultants were noted, covering ordinance applicability, enforcement authority, SOP legal status and integration, replacement and equity priorities, public engagement, effective date considerations, and implementation logistics.

The group also requested the city develop a flowchart-style document to visually explain how the ordinance works in practice, helping both the PIG and the public understand how different scenarios trigger requirements or review processes under the ordinance.

Final Work Product – August 2025

Key Themes and Recommendations

Building on robust discussions with consultants, Ward 2 staff, and the Parks Commission, the TPO PIG identified priority thematic areas—referred to as “buckets”—to organize the ordinance drafting process. The following sections present the group’s detailed recommendations within these themes.

These recommendations are offered with the expectation that they will guide ordinance revisions and support City Council decision-making as the city moves toward finalizing this important tree preservation policy.

Scope and Applicability

The group recommends the ordinance focus on protecting trees located on city-owned land—including boulevards, rights-of-way, parks, and trails—while supporting future efforts to extend protections to private property. Due to jurisdictional complexity, especially where state or county land overlaps city boundaries, clear definitions are needed to distinguish areas (e.g., boulevard vs. trail vs. park) and clarify which department (Public Works vs. Parks) has responsibility. Members also raised concerns about equity and consistency in areas managed by state or county agencies, noting that without broader adoption of tree protections, neighborhoods along state or county roads may face inconsistent or lower standards despite experiencing greater environmental burdens. The group recommends the ordinance acknowledge this gap and identify it as an area for further study and future collaboration with MnDOT, Ramsey County, and other external partners.

In terms of scope, the ordinance should explicitly carve out restoration and invasive species projects to avoid unintended constraints on ecological management. To strengthen implementation and accountability, the group also urges the removal of vague terms like “feasible” or “reasonable,” advocating instead for binding language paired with a transparent public process that allows internal decisions to be reviewed and challenged when necessary.

In terms of implementation, the group emphasized the importance of clear guidance on how the ordinance will apply to projects already underway. While broad applicability to City projects is preferred, flexibility for exceptions is recommended, as members expressed concern that too narrow a definition of “underway” could lead to projects being accelerated to circumvent new requirements. One suggested threshold is to apply the ordinance fully to projects less than 50% through design, while considering partial implementation—such as tree protections—for later-stage projects.

The group also highlighted the need for public understanding and awareness of this new ordinance, noting that outreach components like yard signs and postcards will require time for planning, budgeting, design, and manufacturing. As a result, these public noticing measures may require a staggered rollout. Tree protection measures, however, should be implemented immediately wherever feasible.

Tree Definitions and Thresholds

A member of the group recommends updating the City's 2010 canopy report, which is outdated and no longer reflects current conditions. A new assessment would provide accurate, ward- and district-level data on existing canopy cover, opportunities for canopy expansion, and areas unsuitable for planting. This data is critical for informing equitable investments and supporting location-specific, evidence-based decisions.

The group also supports retaining existing definitions for “heritage” and “significant” trees, while recommending the creation of a new category—“locally significant trees”—to capture trees with high value based on context. These may include smaller trees that provide critical canopy in under-canopied or heat-vulnerable areas. Suggested criteria for this designation include block-level canopy loss and equity indicators, such as location within the least-canopied neighborhoods. This approach ensures that environmental justice and local conditions are meaningfully reflected in tree protections citywide.

Preservation Planning Requirements

The group believes that it is imperative that tree preservation plans be developed early and used to guide project design. They should not be completed after key decisions are made. A two-phase approach was proposed: first, identify at-risk trees and site constraints; second, determine how to avoid or mitigate impacts to all existing trees – especially significant and heritage trees. Plans should be publicly shared before final decisions are made, and outreach should go beyond minimal notice—using multiple meetings, varied formats, and targeted communication to affected neighborhoods. The group emphasized that early, accessible engagement can build trust, prevent conflict, and reduce the likelihood of residents feeling forced to take legal action to protect trees.

Protection During Construction

The group identified enforcement during construction as a critical gap and strongly supports clear, enforceable requirements to protect trees on active job sites. Recommendations include using protective fencing around trees and root zones and preventing root damage from heavy equipment—not just surface coverings. Members cited successful examples where close collaboration between foresters and contractors preserved trees even in constrained spaces. To ensure compliance, the group calls for real-time accountability, including on-site supervision, feedback loops, and follow-up audits throughout construction.

Tree Replacement & Mitigation

The group emphasized that tree protection must extend beyond planting to include full-cycle stewardship—removal, replacement, and long-term establishment. Members expressed deep concern about the number of trees that die after the initial one-year warranty period due to lack of follow-up care. To address this, they recommended that the ordinance require measurable post-planting maintenance and clear accountability for tree health, while allowing for flexibility in how care is provided. What qualifies as “reasonable maintenance” should be defined based on location and context—for example, distinguishing between a high-traffic median and a residential boulevard.

The group agreed that tree removal during construction should be avoided if at all possible and must automatically trigger replacement, not just documentation. In cases where replanting on-site isn't possible, replacement trees should be planted in under-canopied neighborhoods to advance equity. They also discussed how tree replacement ratios should reflect both ecological value and feasibility. While some supported tying replacement requirements to the diameter of the removed tree, others warned against overly high ratios that might lead to poor-quality or “jump” trees. Members supported

referencing publicly available national or international standards to avoid overly prescriptive local rules and promote consistency—particularly for smaller trees under 12 inches in diameter, which are often overlooked in current policy.

To prevent a common pattern in which trees are removed, grates are left empty, and no replanting occurs for years, the group emphasized the importance of full-cycle planning and compliance checks. Ultimately, their goal is to ensure that replacement trees not only get planted but survive and thrive to maturity—contributing to a healthy, resilient, and equitable urban forest.

Oversight and Accountability

The group emphasized the importance of maintaining direct, city-led engagement for projects involving potential tree removal, strongly recommending against outsourcing these activities. A centralized point of contact or a dedicated forestry staff role—potentially an ombudsman-like position focused on tree protections—was suggested to streamline communication, oversee public engagement, and ensure consistent ordinance implementation. While acknowledging financial and staffing constraints, the group noted that investing in dedicated coordination could improve project delivery, leverage community support where available, and prevent future costs, including legal disputes. This approach frames outreach and enforcement not as an added expense but as a cost-saving measure that supports both long-term urban forest health and fiscal responsibility.

The group further emphasized that accountability must be built into every phase of tree protection, from planning to implementation. They called for ordinance language that is strong, clear, and enforceable—not vague or open to internal interpretation. Phrases like “too expensive” or “not feasible” should not be used to dismiss tree protections without a transparent process that allows for scrutiny and challenge. The group stressed that tree protection plans must be proactive rather than aspirational. It’s not enough to say “we’ll try to save them”; instead, plans must anticipate potential impacts and commit to specific strategies for avoiding harm to trees.

Clear public communication was also a recurring theme. Residents and stakeholders should be informed about what will happen, how, and when—particularly when it comes to tree removal, replacement, and maintenance. The group advocated for rooting decision-making in expert guidance, supporting the use of professional standards such as ANSI A300 and recommending the involvement of at least two qualified arborists to ensure balanced, technically sound input. Members also emphasized that the standards and criteria used should be publicly available to ensure transparency and build trust in the process.

Finally, members raised concerns about follow-through. “Tree holes”—the empty spaces left when removed trees are never replaced—were cited as ongoing sources of frustration and safety risk in neighborhoods. To address this, the group urged the city to establish clear timelines, enforceable commitments, and visible accountability measures so that tree protections are not just promised on paper but delivered in practice.

Equity and Environmental Justice

Equity and environmental justice were central themes in the group’s recommendations. Members emphasized that a strong tree preservation ordinance advances equity by making protections the default—reducing the burden on residents to advocate, navigate complex systems, or rely on insider knowledge to benefit from a healthy urban forest. The group stressed that protections and investments must be the norm, with historically under-canopied or heat-vulnerable neighborhoods receiving equal—or greater—attention. If tree planting priorities are developed, members stressed the need for clear public communication about both the rationale and intended outcomes.

One guiding principle emerged clearly: “hold harmless” the areas that already have substantial canopy, while investing deeply in places where canopy is lacking. At the same time, the ordinance’s fundamental purpose is to preserve and protect trees citywide. When removal is necessary, it should require clear, enforceable replanting plans—with specific timelines and locations—not vague promises. Where new planting is concentrated in particular neighborhoods, that prioritization should be backed by publicly available data and criteria to build trust and understanding.

To ensure fairness, the group called for consistent and automatic enforcement of protections, so that benefits don’t skew toward those with more resources, time, or connections. Lowering barriers to protection is itself an equity strategy—ensuring that all neighborhoods and residents, regardless of income or capacity to engage, benefit equally from healthy tree coverage.

The group also discussed potential tensions between tree preservation and accessibility requirements, such as ADA-compliant ramps or sidewalks. Rather than treating these goals as contradictory, members encouraged a balanced approach that recognizes the cooling benefits trees provide, especially for people with disabilities. They observed examples of sidewalks meandering around existing trees, which preserves trees while maintaining accessibility, and noted that some trees pre-date sidewalks, highlighting how creative placement can balance public infrastructure needs with tree protection. The group emphasized the importance of considering ADA accessibility in tree and sidewalk planning. They recommended consultation with ADA experts and possibly including ordinance language that affirms both environmental and accessibility priorities.

Public Process and Transparency

The group emphasized that public engagement around tree protection must become more accessible, equitable, and effective. Although the existing petition-based review process is intended to empower residents, members observed that it often benefits individuals with greater resources, legal knowledge, or district council support, while those without such resources are left without relief. This disparity can lead to inconsistent outcomes across neighborhoods. To address this imbalance, the group supported a hybrid model that retains the petition option but significantly strengthens proactive, city-led notification and engagement.

There was strong interest in ensuring that the city fulfills its responsibility to keep residents clearly, consistently, and accessibly informed in a timely manner about tree-related projects. Notices should use plain, multilingual language and be delivered through multiple channels, including postcards, signage, and online platforms. On-site signage was especially popular as a visible, low-cost, and trustworthy way to reach people directly affected by nearby tree removals or construction. Supporting materials should help bridge the gap between technical documentation and everyday understanding by using QR codes, timelines, maps, and straightforward summaries explaining how and when residents can get involved.

The group also expressed support for objective, threshold-based triggers—such as the number of trees involved, project size, or budget—to require automatic reviews or public notifications, rather than relying solely on petitions. Whether triggered by petition or criteria, independent review processes were viewed as essential to building public trust and accountability. Even a small number of trees removed in a limited area can be as detrimental as larger removals in bigger projects.

Another recurring theme was the importance of early involvement by forestry staff. Too often, staff are brought into city projects after critical decisions have already been made, limiting their ability to influence tree outcomes. The group recommended codifying early forestry engagement in the ordinance, alongside clearer enforcement roles and stronger accountability mechanisms, especially during construction.

Ultimately, the group acknowledged that building transparency and trust will take time, and that progress may need to be incremental given the history around this issue and current staffing constraints. Still, even small improvements—like clearer notices or better online tools—can make a meaningful difference. The ordinance should be designed not only to inform residents, but to empower them, especially those who may not otherwise have the time, language access, or insider knowledge to participate in shaping their urban forest.

Rulemaking vs. Legislative Detail

The group focused on finding the right balance between what should be codified in the ordinance and what should be addressed through administrative rulemaking. There was strong support for a hybrid approach: establishing clear values and guardrails within the ordinance while delegating technical implementation and evolving best practices to staff-driven rulemaking—provided that such rulemaking includes meaningful opportunities for public input. Importantly, rulemaking must never be used to weaken the tree protections that form the ordinance’s core purpose. This balance was seen as key to ensuring both clarity and adaptability, especially given long-term factors like climate resilience, infrastructure changes, and shifts in forestry best practices.

A recurring theme was the importance of putting tree preservation experts at the right point in the process. Members cautioned against overly prescriptive ordinance language—for example, listing physical symptoms of tree stress—arguing instead for referencing professional standards that can be updated more easily over time. By grounding technical decisions in expert judgment rather than legislative minutiae, the ordinance can remain responsive to changing conditions without sacrificing transparency or accountability.

Communication and public notification were viewed as baseline expectations, regardless of project size. The group expressed support for simple, accessible notifications (like postcards) for even minor projects, especially where tree impacts might otherwise go unnoticed—such as routine utility replacements. Scaling communication and tree protection strategies to match project complexity was another important consideration. For large developments, tree-related updates should be built into existing public engagement processes; for smaller or piecemeal projects, online logs or public records could provide a lightweight form of notice and transparency.

Group members also raised questions around thresholds and what qualifies a tree as significant enough to warrant heightened protection or mitigation. There was interest in defining categories such as “notable,” “locally significant,” or “champion” trees—especially to safeguard older or unique specimens that offer substantial ecological or cultural value.

Saint Paul’s existing Tree Preservation District, located south of Lower Afton Road in the Highwood Neighborhood, was referenced as a model. The district’s purpose is to preserve the area’s natural, wooded character by ensuring that development minimizes the loss of existing trees and, in some cases, requires planting replacement trees. Within this district, a Tree Preservation Plan must be submitted and approved before the City will authorize any grading permit, lot split, plat, or site plan—unless the applicant can demonstrate that no existing trees are within the limits of disturbance—or any building permit that involves removing a tree with a diameter of 12 inches or more.

The structure and timing of rulemaking also came up, with some group members referencing past Council discussions. While some favored concurrent rule development alongside ordinance adoption, others supported a phased approach—as long as staff had a clear mandate, and public input was built into the process. Members expressed differing views on the level of detail appropriate for the ordinance text itself. Some cautioned that too much specificity could reduce flexibility and erode public trust if it leads to delays, legal challenges, or difficulty adapting over time. Others felt that greater detail could help build public trust by increasing clarity, transparency, and accountability.

Throughout the discussion, group members emphasized the importance of accessible, ongoing engagement. Examples like the Grand Avenue office hours were held up as good models for transparent, responsive city practice. At the same time, frustrations were voiced about gaps in existing protections—especially for mature trees lost during major infrastructure projects like West 7th. These stories reinforced the group’s overarching belief that a transparent, expert-informed, and adaptable ordinance is necessary to rebuild public trust and ensure the long-term health of Saint Paul’s urban forest.

Creative Ideas

The group explored creative strategies to engage residents and local businesses in supporting Saint Paul’s urban forest, with a focus on voluntary programs that enhance equity, stewardship, and community pride. One key idea was to offer tax credits or other incentives for residents—especially property owners with the capacity to contribute—to plant and water trees, including those on public property adjacent to their homes. These programs would not replace public responsibility but rather complement it by encouraging private investment in tree care where resources are more available. This approach could help expand the urban canopy, reduce the burden on City maintenance crews, and foster a broader sense of shared responsibility—while ensuring that City-led efforts remain concentrated in neighborhoods with the greatest canopy needs.

The group also expressed strong interest in launching a local version of Minneapolis’ “Brewing a Better Forest” initiative in partnership with Saint Paul breweries. The program, which engages neighborhood taprooms to promote tree care and raise funds for public tree planting, was seen as a promising model for combining environmental action with community gathering spaces. Members envisioned hosting tree-themed events, sharing tree-watering tips with patrons, and directing proceeds to areas with low tree cover and heightened climate vulnerability. By tapping into local business networks and cultivating a culture of collective care, this strategy offers a way to blend environmental justice with creative civic engagement—building a greener, more resilient Saint Paul in the process.