

17 February, 2026

Mr. Mayor and City Council,

I think it is great that we are discussing trees! This is one of the rare issues that nearly everyone agrees on—we *all* love trees and think more would be better. Below are several considerations for Council and staff regarding the Urban Canopy report. Forgive me if I'm just missing the point of the report.

1. Are We Giving Up?

The report divides every square foot of the city into “suitable” and “unsuitable” areas for new trees using what looks like a reasonable set of criteria.

- ≈ 80% of our city's area is deemed unsuitable,
- ≈ 15% of Costa Mesa already under tree canopy,
- This leaves only about 5% of land as potentially available for new trees—land currently classified as vegetation or soil.

It concerns me that in a report meant to guide future tree strategy, a full third of our city's land is deemed unsuitable simply because it is currently classified as “roads.” I feel like I might be missing something? When presented with a report on our urban trees, wouldn't most people imagine that this exercise is about the canopy over our streets? If we categorize the streets as unsuitable, are we not eliminating the very places where trees would provide the most visible public benefit? Is “unsuitable” meant to describe a permanent physical limitation, or simply a current condition? If it is the latter, then it seems precisely the sort of condition that future strategy should be willing to reconsider.

“There is too much hot hard asphalt in the world.”

- Christopher Alexander

2. How Should We Categorize Canopy Coverage?

The report strangely divides our tree canopy into council district, census tract, and land use category. Would it not be more meaningful to look at the canopy in a more intuitive way? For example: major corridors, minor corridors, and residential streets? Again—is that not what most would expect from such a report?

And then rather than ensuring similar percentages of coverage across abstract and arbitrary lines, we can be better informed to figure out how to prioritize new trees along our public rights of way. For example, should corridors like Harbor Boulevard or Newport Boulevard be evaluated differently from a quiet residential cul-de-sac? They serve very different public roles and likely merit different canopy priorities.

3. The Benefits of Trees

The report lists five benefits of street trees: pollution removal, carbon storage, carbon sequestration, avoided runoff, and oxygen production. Those are fine, but they are mostly abstract, and subject to ideologically-driven accusations and dismissals. And I wouldn't expect the average person to cite any of those if asked why they love trees and want to see more of them. I would expect people to reach for language that describes how it just *feels better* when there are trees around! Yes, that is abstract too, and subjective—but at least it's a rationale that's closer to our actual experiences. And it does not seem impossible or unreasonable to use it as a basis for deciding where to plant new trees.

If we could articulate this sentiment into arguments, I think they could be just as persuasive and resonate more with more people. Street trees can create a sense of enclosure—both horizontal, by framing and protecting the pedestrian realm from fast-moving cars, and vertical, by filtering sunlight and softening the sky above us. They bring soil, birds, shade, and seasonality into places that might otherwise feel sterile and overbuilt. They visually narrow the driver's field of view, which naturally slows traffic. And over time, they give streets charm, character, and a sense of permanence—things we *all* want.

4. If We Want Healthy Street Trees and Big Canopies, We Must Design for Them

This is a moot point if we give up out of the gate by writing off “roads” as unsuitable places for new trees—but I hope we can recognize that the edges and middle of “roads” are some of the best places for urban trees. If we want large shade trees with real canopy, we must design to accommodate them. Otherwise, we will continue planting small ornamental trees that never mature into the treescapes people imagine when they say they want “more trees.”

Though planting in streets do not come without challenges. Fire departments typically do not like how they can block their parking areas alongside buildings and public works departments typically do not like how the roots can interfere with paving and underground utilities.

Luckily, we do not have to figure out solutions to these problems on our own—many [other cities](#) have struggled through this in their commitments to getting great treescapes, and have paved the way for smaller cities like ours. The report would therefore ideally include discussion on techniques and technologies that facilitate the feasibility and vitality of large trees in urban environments. ([Silva cells](#) for example!).

In addition to the technical and underground design, there are valid questions about urban design that should be discussed: What types of trees are appropriate where? How far should they be set from building façades and into the streetscape? What about spacing?

5. Species Selection Should Be Simplified for the Rest of Us!

The species list in the report is technical and overwhelming. For most residents, the relevant characteristics of our trees might rather include the things that most people care about:

- Height at maturity
- Canopy diameter at maturity
- Maintenance burden
- Whether they drop problematic debris
- Whether they are native or climate-appropriate

That's it! The technical disease resistance discussion is important—but that is expert-level filtering that should be done before the final nominees are presented for a discussion of design that should follow.

6. Long-Term Vision: Green Corridors & City Structure

Since we're talking about trees, I may as well mention the potential we still kind of have for a city greenbelt. There are about a dozen major greenbelts being pieced together in cities across the country, including the following: Atlanta, Georgia has the *Atlanta BeltLine*; Houston, Texas has *Bayou Greenways 2020*; Minneapolis, Minnesota has the *Grand Rounds Scenic Byway*; Nashville, Tennessee has the *Nashville Greenway System*; Portland, Oregon has the *40-Mile Loop*; Boston, Massachusetts has the *Emerald Necklace*; Louisville, Kentucky has the *Olmsted Parkways and Park System*; and Raleigh, North Carolina has the *Neuse River and Regional Greenway Network*. See also what they do in [Hamburg](#). There is history of consideration of this type of thing in Costa Mesa, and it is likely something that people would want. As we densify, I think the preservation/creation of large connected open spaces and *wildness* becomes even more important. Through foresight and luck, we have Fairview Park on one side and the Back Bay on the other, with spaces not yet carpeted by townhouse projects that might one day connect the two.

"When the countryside is far away, the city becomes a prison."
- Christopher Alexander

Thanks for reading!

Russell Toler