Urban Forest Strategy 2040 Background & Benchmarking Report Executive Summary

June 2023

Prepared for the City of Port Phillip by St Jack & Co

Introduction

The City of Port Phillip is developing a new Urban Forest Strategy to plan for increased urban greening over the coming decades. Knowledge and practice of urban greening has evolved significantly since the City of Port Phillip adopted its first greening strategy, Greening Port Phillip, in 2010 (GPP 2010). The Background & Benchmarking Report synthesises the current strategic context, knowledge and best practice, to provide a cohesive evidence base for the new strategy.

Collectively, all trees and plants on public and private land make up our urban forest. This includes trees, shrubs and groundcovers in home gardens, on green roofs, walls and facades, on nature strips, medians and roundabouts, in parks and reserves, and in shopping strips, car parks and industrial areas.

Port Phillip has an established heritage of parks, public and private gardens, and tree-lined streets that contribute to mature canopy and greening across most neighbourhoods. From boulevards of Plane Trees to thriving indigenous plantings in biolinks, from Canary Island Date Palms along the foreshore to backyards and community gardens – our urban forest is an integral part of the Port Phillip identity.

We want to protect the greening we already have, help it thrive, and take practical action to expand our urban forest within the complexities of our urban environment.



Background

The evidence is comprehensive and clear – the urban forest offers a multitude of benefits to people, economies and nature in cities. Greener cities promote happiness, health, physical activity, and community connectedness. Water use, stormwater management costs and flood risks reduce. Air quality is better, and neighbourhoods are cooler. Soil productivity, local food security, and biodiversity improve. House prices rise and commercial strips thrive. Urban forests also sequester carbon, reduce emissions, and mitigate climate change risks. There are risks to manage too, with diverse views on aesthetics, solar panel shading, debris and limb drop, vandalism, and grey infrastructure conflicts.

Urban forestry is also well-supported in terms of strategic and community alignment. In recent years, the Port Phillip **community has consistently raised greening as a major priority** for the City. Over the last decade, **urban forestry has become well-integrated in local, regional, state and global strategies and policy** – from global goals to reach nature-positive and net zero, to local strategies like the *Council Plan 2021-2031, Act and Adapt: Sustainable Environment Strategy* and *Places for People: Public Space Strategy*. Council has set a range of indicators and targets relating to the urban forest, including direct measures of increased greening (eg. canopy cover, trees planted), and indirect measures of greening benefits (eg. pollutants removed, reduction in hotspots).

In the public realm, the **City of Port Phillip manages approximately 46,000 trees**, 75% of which are street trees. Tree species and genus diversity in the tree population is generally good, with only one species, the London Plane, above 5% of the total tree population. Biodiversity values remaining in the City are significant, and require protection and enhancement for future generations.



Since 2010, the City of Port Phillip has delivered substantial greening action, investment, research and planning to integrate greening into Council plans and operations. There has been an increased focus on biodiversity and biolinks, more understorey plantings, engineered solutions for passive watering, increased soil volume and greening on buildings, and community-led produce and verge gardening. There is still room to grow, and all of us will need to work together to green the City.

There is still room to grow, and strong collaboration between Council, community, State Government and other stakeholders will be essential for success.

Tree canopy cover of the City of Port Phillip was **17.17% in 2022, down from 17.86% in 2012**. The City has increased its overall canopy cover on roads and public land (+0.39%), but not enough to outpace the overall loss on private land (-1.09%). With about half of the City area being privately owned, it is clear that **greening on private land will need to play a greater role in increasing the urban forest**.



Benchmarking

Port Phillip is not alone in its efforts to expand and improve its urban forest. Ten neighbouring and peer Councils with urban forest or greening strategies have been benchmarked alongside Greening Port Phillip 2010 to identify common themes, individual highlights, and opportunities for Port Phillip to improve. Alongside the benchmarking is a review of global and local urban forestry guidance, the latest research, and other contemporary tree strategies and case studies. The key findings on common themes, emerging evidence-based best practice, and how to measure success, are outlined below.

There is **widespread agreement on the importance of increasing tree canopy cover**, creating new green spaces, and establishing green corridors to connect and enhance existing green spaces. Councils most commonly cited the benefits of urban cooling, carbon capture, stormwater benefits and improved air quality. Councils also emphasise the need for community engagement, partnerships, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation to ensure the success and sustainability of urban greening initiatives. Most strategies had around a 20-year lifespan. A long-term strategic outlook is typical because trees are often slow growing, with decades needed to measure success against absolute canopy cover targets. For practicality, shorter-term action plans and regular monitoring can complement long-term goals.

The most commonly cited challenges for urban forestry cover four key themes:

- *Climate change* Trees are long-lived assets, so tree populations need to be diverse and well-managed to resist extreme heat, drought, pests and diseases. Greening is an important tool to prepare our communities for these changed conditions, especially through carbon capture, urban cooling and flood risk reduction.
- **Contested urban spaces** Plants need soil, water, nutrients, space, air and light to grow and thrive. New development, utilities and infrastructure, limited water access, compacted soils, pollution, heat, and direct damage all threaten greening. Public space is scarce, with trade-offs and smart design needed to address all desired objectives.
- (un)Healthy tree populations Urban forests can be at risk long-term without 'defensive diversity' through a mixture of species, age, sizes and functions. They need proactive management including good design, site and soil preparation, passive irrigation, young tree care, health audits, pest treatments, risk management, and other ongoing maintenance.
- **Community values** Perceptions on urban greening can have a large impact on the quality and quantity of the urban forest. For example, communities who value trees and actively engage in greening are likely to retain trees and increase greening, whereas, in communities where trees are not valued, they may not be well-funded or prioritised in capital works. Fears and concerns, both real and perceived, all threaten the urban forest.

It is now widely accepted that all cities should have an urban forestry or greening strategy. At a minimum, these should include actions to protect existing trees, increase tree canopy against a target, manage and maintain healthy tree populations, and collect data on Council's urban forest and canopy.

For Councils going beyond the baseline, best practice and emerging strategic themes are listed below.

These themes are discussed in the Background & Benchmarking Report, supported by case studies.

- Spatially prioritised greening for climate adaptation and social equity
- Outcome-oriented targets, with proactive monitoring and promotion of progress
- Strengthened tree protections
- Defensive diversity and biodiversity sensitive urban design (BSUD)
- Engineered solutions to recover space and support thriving trees
- Community education, stewardship and engagement
- Greening on private land
- Manage trees as assets, reflecting their true economic value
- Systematic integration of greening across Council and beyond
- Proactive innovation, including R&D partnerships.

Well-considered monitoring can support adaptive management, bolster high-level support, and minimise unexpected costs, waste and distractions from on-ground delivery. Greening targets are commonly used to set a specific ambition. The most commonly used targets are for percentage canopy cover and number of trees planted, but there is a growing global trend towards targets that are outcome-based (eg. equal access, health & wellbeing, active transport) or specific to land use types (residential, commercial, industrial) or tenures (public and private).



Acknowledgement of Country

Council respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of this land, the people of the Kulin Nation. We pay our respect to their Elders, past and present. We acknowledge and uphold their continuing relationship to this land.

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Find out more

Read the full Background & Benchmarking Report and other documents at haveyoursay.portphillip.vic.gov.au/urban-forest-strategy

