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Leveraging a Non-Profit-Public Partnership to Meet the Needs of Austin's Urban Forest

The urban forest and natural areas of Lady Bird Lake receive over 4 million visitors each year and represent the heart of Austin's downtown park system. Austin's Parks and Recreation Department (PARC) relies on a non-profit-public partnership with The Trail Foundation (TTF) to address the management demands of the ~200 acres of forested parkland surrounding the lake. This partnership provides a mechanism for prioritizing and funding the urban forestry needs of the area.

Keywords

urban natural areas management, private-public partnerships

INTRODUCTION

The urban forest and natural areas of Lady Bird Lake receive over 4 million visitors each year and represent the heart of Austin's downtown park system. Austin's Parks and Recreation Department (PARC) relies on a non-profit-public partnership with The Trail Foundation (TTF) to address the management demands of the ~200 acres of forested parkland surrounding the lake. This partnership provides a mechanism for prioritizing and funding the urban forestry needs of the area.



Image 1. Lady Bird Lake. Image Credit: Leslie Lilly

CONTEXT

PARC's Urban Forestry unit has 12 staff dedicated to tree maintenance activities, a total program budget of \$2.7M, and responsibility for trees in 300 parks across more than 20,000 acres of parkland. Given the constrained resources, tree maintenance activities are prioritized according to the risk posed to the general public, leaving little capacity for larger conservation and protection efforts.

Adopted by City Council in 2014, the Austin Urban Forest Plan established a long-range, comprehensive master plan for the management of Austin's urban public forested areas. For three years, the city staff and Austin citizens collaborated to create a strategic road map for protecting and enhancing public forests. Although the partnership between the City of Austin and TTF began in 2005, the Urban Forest Plan provided a call to action which catalyzed a more robust relationship between the two entities.

GOALS

Through partnership with TTF, PARD hopes to improve conservation, restoration, stewardship, and maintenance efforts on the public lands surrounding Lady Bird Lake. Contending with growing user impacts while preserving the environmental integrity of the Trail's natural areas creates a significant challenge for land managers. Through a large-scale collaboration with the City and other partners, TTF identified five management priorities to guide future efforts: restore and enhance plant communities, repair and improve ecological function, enhance resilience, enhance the user experience, and facilitate stewardship.

In addition, PARD serves many diverse communities across the city and is committed to managing resource allocation equitably. The active management required for the Trail would represent an inequitable draft from Department resources. Unlike PARD, TTF is positioned to acquire funding from diverse sources, dramatically reducing the impact to Department budgets and facilitating land management activities that PARD would find difficult to prioritize.

APPROACH USED

In 2015, as a response to the Austin Urban Forest Plan, TTF commissioned a plan to specifically address the urban forest around the lake: *The Butler Trail at Lady Bird Lake: Urban Forestry and Natural Area Management Guidelines*. This publication included the first comprehensive tree inventory of the area, a complete tree risk assessment, a prioritized list of land management tasks, and a five-year work plan.

In the first years following the publication of these guidelines, neither the City nor TTF had the capacity for implementation, and while the guidelines successfully identified *what* needed to be done, there was not a clear path for *how*. Additionally, the approval process for partnership projects had not been formalized, causing massive time delays and putting project plans out of date.

The implementation of this work did not begin in earnest until 2017, when PARD was able to hire a liaison position to coordinate with non-profit partners, and by spring of 2018 a digital Community Activated Park Project (CAPP) proposal and review process was developed. This process provided a well-defined mechanism for non-profit partners to work with City staff on parkland projects, and in its first year 156 projects were submitted by partners across the city. Having a formal process also enabled nonprofits to raise greater revenue, resulting in the infusion of over \$9 million into the park system by private contributions in 2018, including \$2.5 million into downtown parkland by TTF.

Over the last three years, TTF has been able to better support the priorities of PARD's Urban Forestry unit by providing resources to address all manner of forestry work including safety pruning, invasive tree removals and treatment, vine removals, tree planting, soil amendment, and many broad-scale restoration projects.



Image 2. Lady Bird Lake. Image Credit: Leslie Lilly

RESOURCES

TTF uses a combination of corporate sponsorships, grant awards, and private donations to support its forestry and natural area management work. With an increase in usage from 2.6 million to over 4 million visitors in the past two years, the expense and need for active management of the trail and park system is ever increasing. In 2019, TTF will spend more than \$300,000 of private funds on forestry related work, a substantial increase from previous years. Additionally, the TTF coordinates and deploys hundreds of volunteers each year to help with these efforts, a contribution valued at over \$60,000.

KEY RESULTS

- Comprehensive tree inventory of study area to aid in forestry management (+6k trees)
- Annual tree risk assessment commissioned by TTF to help PARD prioritize work
- Partnership used to address the Austin Urban Forest Plan—increase canopy cover, improve ecosystem health, and increase resiliency
- TTF sees marked increase in funding received for forestry activities:
 - 2011–2015: \$118,526
 - 2016–2018: \$319,350
 - 2019 to date: \$309,500

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

<https://thetrailfoundation.org/portfolio/urban-forestry-plan-ecological-restoration/>