

Louisville faces billion dollar tree rescue



[James Bruggers](#), @jbruggers 10:41 a.m. EDT March 26, 2015

Now the heavy lifting begins for what could be described as a billion dollar tree rescue.

With the release of a study that shows a loss of 54,000 trees a year for Louisville, city officials and others on Wednesday were talking about what comes next.

First is a 60-day public comment period on the \$115,700 study.

Beyond that, the Davey Resources Group report lays out options in dollars and cents — the hundreds of millions of dollars a year in benefits, for example, that the city's trees provide, such as cleaner air, lower cooling bills and less stormwater runoff. The report also calculates that Louisville might need to spend as much as \$1.7 billion on a tree-planting program over 40 years to achieve a goal of covering 45 percent of its 398 square miles that includes all of Jefferson County.

The study pegged the current tree canopy coverage at 37 percent, and found that if nothing is done, tree coverage could fall to only 31 percent by 2022 and 21 percent by 2052.

"We want to change how people look at trees," said Mayor Greg Fischer.

They are not just for beauty, he told a gathering of more than two dozen tree advocates, business leaders, city employees and the news media. The city's estimated 6.2 million trees "are just as vital to us as our sidewalks, our roads and our bridges," he said.

A depleted tree canopy leads to higher energy bills for businesses and homes, and makes temperatures rise, which exacerbates health issues especially for the sick and elderly. Fischer said tree losses make Louisville less desirable compared to cities with greater canopies, and they affect property values.

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The report, labeled as a final draft, gives Louisville for the first time comprehensive data on its so-called urban forest.

It surveys metro council district by metro council district, suburban city by suburban city, and census tract by census tract, providing detailed information about their tree canopy, land-use changes and so-called "hot spots."

Eventually, city officials said, the report will be published in interactive format online that will allow people to point and click their way to information about their own streets and neighborhoods.

Davey found that Louisville lags behind Charlotte, N.C, Nashville, Tenn., Pittsburgh, Pa., and Knoxville, Tenn., in overall tree canopy, but is doing better than St. Louis, Mo., and Lexington.

Development is identified as a significant cause of the tree decline. Between 2004 and 2012, the amount of pavement, concrete and space occupied by buildings increased by 15 percent. Conversion from trees to sports fields also played a role.

But more than half of all the tree-covered acreage lost occurred on land occupied by single-family homes. And the report notes that a lot of trees have also been wiped out by storms and disease.

What's happened is obvious and people have noticed, said Louisville Metro Councilman Bill Hollander, D-9th District. "People are seeing too many stumps and not enough trees," he said.

Each metro council district shows a tree decline, from 1 percent loss in [District 14](#) in southwest Louisville to 17 percent in [District 21](#), which includes the areas east, west and north of Louisville International Airport.

More than one-third of the 26 council districts experienced double-digit losses in tree canopy, with the biggest decline inside the Watterson Expressway, and south of it.

The report also examined 83 suburban cities and found their combined tree canopy coverage at just 31 percent. Of them only West Buechel and Heritage Creek showed increased tree canopy over the study period, though West Buechel was ranked as having the least tree canopy of all the small cities at 11 percent.

Using information collected for another study that's coming on urban heat, the report identified some of the region's "hot spots," where temperatures soar because of a lack of trees and a lot of roads or buildings.

"The hottest neighborhoods are clustered along the interstate (65) corridor from the urban center to the airport," the report found.

The coolest neighborhoods: Cherokee Gardens, Cherokee Seneca, and Iroquois Park. Those areas were as much as 14 degrees cooler than the hot spots.

Erin Thompson, Louisville's urban forester, said the city intends to develop a forestry management plan to guide its response to the findings. The emphasis on tree planting will be areas that need trees the most to fight heat or to reduce stormwater runoff.

One wild card is the emerald ash borer, which the study said could wipe out an additional 625,000 to 1 million ash trees in the next five to 10 years.

The report contains more than 40 recommendations. It found that Louisville can reduce its future tree planting costs substantially if it can stem the tree losses, which amount to about 150 trees per day.

It calls for curbing those tree losses within five years, and planting trees for 40 years, to either maintain the city's current canopy coverage, or meet that goal of 45 percent tree cover. Costs range from \$1 billion to \$1.7 billion over four decades.

The report recommends the city consider stronger development codes and a tree preservation ordinance, to tighten tree policy in Louisville, in addition to planting hundreds of thousands to as many as 3.5 million trees.

"We are removing too many trees and we need to plant more trees," said arborist Chris O'Bryan, co-owner of Limbwalker Tree Services. "The only to stop removing trees is through regulation.

But Charles J. Kavanaugh, executive vice president of the Building Industry Association of Greater Louisville, said he doesn't see any need for tougher tree rules.

He said the rules have already grown more stringent in the last decade. He said he looks forward to supporting the mayor's tree initiatives.

"We know the value of trees," Kavanaugh added.

For his part, Hollander said he believes the city needs a tree preservation ordinance, and looks forward to one that's being developed by the Louisville Metro Tree Advisory Commission.

"I would certainly be a supporter and I think there would be others," he added.

Fischer said he's not sure whether he will back any new tree preservation policies.

"Development and tree canopy is not an either-or," he said. "Great cities figure out how to get this done."

He said he's looking for ideas on how to stop the loss of trees, and what role business and other members of the community can play.

"We are asking our citizens to really engage on this," the mayor said.

Reach reporter James Bruggers at 502-582-4645 or on Twitter @jbruggers.

What's next

- Read the full report attached to separate report on a proposed solution at www.courier-journal.com
- Send comments to: communityforestry@louisvilleky.gov
- Attend public meeting at 6:30 p.m., May 14, Louisville Metro Hall, 527 W. Jefferson St.

By the numbers

6.2 million: Estimated number of trees in Metro Louisville.

37: Percentage of city's 398 square miles covered by trees.

29: Percentage of tree canopy coverage excluding parks.

7: Percentage reduction in the number of trees between 2004 and 2012.

820: Number of acres of tree canopy lost every year.

45: Percentage tree coverage goal identified in the report.

12: Percent of city classified as heat stressed.

3.4 million. Number of trees needed to be planted to reach canopy goal, if tree losses are not stopped.

\$1.7 billion. Cost of tree planting program over 40 years to reach tree canopy goal, if tree losses are not stopped.

Most tree canopy by neighborhood

Iroquois Park, 68%

Cherokee Seneca, 55%

Cherokee Gardens, 53%

Brownsboro Zorn, 51%

Audubon Park, 48%

Least tree canopy by neighborhood

Standiford, 3%

Fairgrounds, 6%

Central Business District, 8%

University, 11%

Phoenix Hill, 11%

Most tree canopy by suburban cities

Mockingbird Valley, 70%

Ten Broeck, 69%

Indian Hills, 64%

Hollyvilla, 57%

Least tree canopy by suburban city

West Buechel, 11%

Poplar Hills, 13%

Watterson Park, 15%

Sycamore, 17%

Coldstream, 19%

Suburban cities with the largest hot spots

Jeffersontown, 1,836 acres.

St. Matthews, 873 acres.

Shively, 776 acres.

Middletown, 479 acres.

Watterson Park, 432 acres.

Help is on the way

•Tree advocate and philanthropist Henry Heuser Jr. is creating a nonprofit group that will raise money to plant and maintain trees. Longtime gardening expert and broadcaster Cindi Sullivan will be its executive director.

•Mayor Greg Fischer said local government alone cannot stop the decline of the city's tree canopy, and that the nonprofit is key to any success. **Page XX**