

Commission forwards “no-net-loss” tree canopy recommendation to mayor

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Metro Parks had to remove four aging pin oaks on Eastern Parkway earlier this year. Credit: Courier-Journal files, Aaron Borton.

A recommendation of a citywide goal of “no net loss” of the city’s tree canopy will go to the mayor, as a first step toward expanding Louisville’s “urban forest” and a possible comprehensive tree protection ordinance.

The city’s Tree Advisory Commission approved the recommendation last week, while yours truly was on vacation. I’ve been told that two commission members abstained: Robert Eberenz, Jr., president of the Home Builders Association of Louisville, and Scott Hannah, a landscape architect at Heritage Engineering.

Prior to the meeting, commission co-chair Katy Schneider told me that such a statement coming from Mayor Greg Fischer could provide guidance on issues such as plans to remove and trim trees in runway approaches to Bowman Field, tree provisions in metro government’s development code, and the city’s response to threats from the emerald ash borer, an insect that has killed millions of trees farther north and is now starting to kill ash trees in Louisville.

As much as 10 percent to 17 percent of the county’s tree canopy is thought to be composed of ash trees.

“The mayor will certainly take the commission recommendations under advisement once the group sends them to him,” said Chris Poynter, spokesman for Fischer. “The mayor wants to protect and enhance the city’s tree canopy, and he created the commission to offer advice and counsel on how to achieve that.”

The Courier-Journal in October reported that Louisville’s trees are fighting a losing battle to storms, invasive pests, neglect and age — and the mighty oaks, maples and ash that once towered over parkways, neighborhood streets, parks and backyards are not being replaced.

A study by a University of Louisville urban planning and environmental law class found last year that the city’s tree canopy only covers about 27 percent of Jefferson County, while tree cover in other Southern cities can shade 40 percent to 50 percent of a community.

The city has some 300 vacant tree wells downtown.

And Brian Stone Jr., an associate professor of city and regional planning at the Georgia Institute of Technology, has found that Louisville's urban heat island, the difference between city temperatures and surrounding rural areas, may be growing at one of the fastest rates in the country.

Some development interests on a committee working on changes to the tree provisions of the development code have suggested relaxing tree requirements.