

September 28, 2023

Dear Mayor Watson and City Council Members,

As licensed architects, we are entrusted by the state of Texas to deliver built environments that are both equitable and sustainable. But this responsibility does not stop at the face of a building; it extends to the outdoor environment, the shared right-of-way, and the interconnectivity of our urban fabric.

We need more trees in our city, and where they really count: along streets, to shade pathways for walking and cycling, so Austinites can have more dignified and comfortable access to transit and other pedestrian destinations. This has become both an affordability issue and a critical public health issue, as our climate is trending hotter and hotter, stressing our lower-income communities disproportionately.

A continuous canopy of street trees is the most promising avenue of investment to make Austin more accessible, equitable, and sustainable. Providing shaded sidewalks was the design basis for the Austin's Downtown Great Streets standards, inaugurated by you, Mayor Watson, in 2000. If street trees have been effective downtown, we posit that they should also be encouraged in other neighborhoods, particularly those that are historically underserved.

The Austin Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA Austin), is aware of the many challenges to planting street trees in the public right-of-way, where utilities compete for space, both underground and overhead. We know there are new methods to achieve the peaceful co-existence of pipes and trees and are encouraged by our City Manager's strides to address issues that jeopardize new street trees, such as the permitting process itself, with often unpredictable and conflicting interpretations of codes and criteria manuals, not to mention the added reviews to get the license agreement required for trees.

We urge leadership to guide the planning, design, implementation and maintenance of our public rights-of-way and spaces. In today's site plan permit review process, street trees are often viewed as conflicting with utility reviewers and their specific requirements. Oftentimes this leads to the deletion of these trees, without compromise or negotiation. We encourage council members to empower the City Manager to develop strategies that preserve the integrity of street trees.

We have helped to craft a City Council resolution to be heard on October 19th calling for the following:

1. Empower the City Manager to realign our city's goals around street trees;
2. Align codes and criteria manuals with city policies and plans;
3. Eliminate the license agreement requirement and other disincentives to planting trees in the public rights-of-way; and
4. Allow both private and public development to benefit from the new tree supply contract, as well as the city's new, improved tree-planting details and specifications.

Planting more Street Trees is one of the few efforts that successfully advances both the interests of equity and sustainability. For that reason, it has the full support of AIA Austin.

Sincerely,



Christy Taylor, AIA
AIA Austin President