

The Role of Local Government in the Care of Urban Forested Natural Areas



Call to action

Across the United States, municipal and county governments are responsible for managing urban forested natural areas within city landscapes, primarily through parks and recreation departments. While these green spaces provide cities with essential benefits, many of these departments face challenges. One primary challenge is a lack of visibility among local government leadership and consequently resources needed to manage and protect them. We find that this stems from the systematic lack of formalization and prioritization of units and departments to care for natural areas within local government offices. Based on the successes of Forests in Cities network members, a gold standard should be set for cities to establish units responsible for the care of forested natural areas that are adequately funded to do so. Jurisdiction is not enough to ensure long term success, adequate funding and resources is essential to their long term success. Leadership, regardless of government structure, is a key element in successful care of forested natural areas. The support and championship of the public is an essential compliment for successful governance of natural areas.

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Introduction

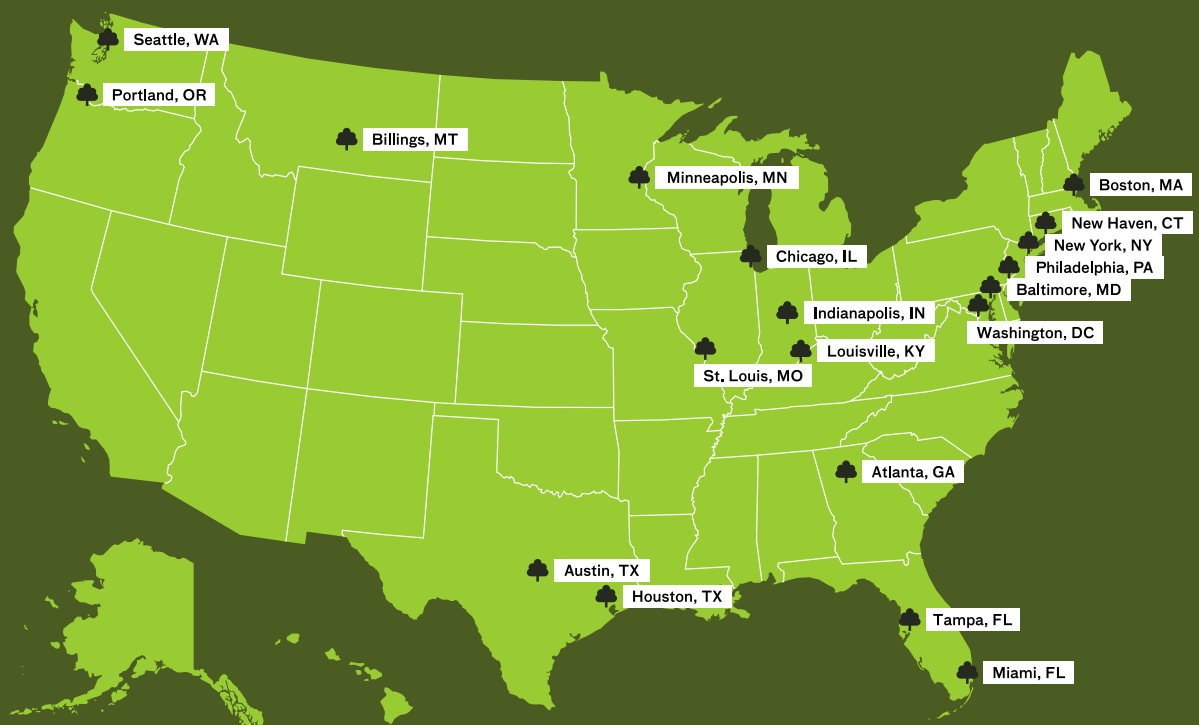
Urban natural areas are crucial for enhancing city livability and environmental health but are often overlooked, underfunded, and missing formal protection, which leads to loss of ecological benefits, missed opportunities for community engagement and nature access, and overall loss of natural areas.

Governance structures for urban forested natural areas vary widely between cities, with different combinations of governments and various jurisdictions owning and managing forests. The following report examines how local governments across the U.S. have structured natural areas management and

what implications that structure has on funding and protecting these forests. This will provide insight when local governments are considering how to structure their own forest governance and shed light on the current state of local governance.

The basis for this report was a survey distributed to the 19 cities in the Forests in Cities network in 2024 along with several interviews with members of the Forests in Cities Network. The survey had 22 responses from 18 cities and asked questions about local government structure and what respondents would like to change about the current structure in their cities.

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Most Common Organizations in Charge of Forested Natural Areas

Forests in Cities Network members were asked which entities have jurisdiction over forested natural areas in their cities.

	City parks and recreation department	21
	Nonprofit	19
	State parks system	11
	Water/sewage department	7
	Private organization/landowner	7
	Public works department	5
	County parks system	5
	City environmental department	4
	National parks service	4
	County environmental office	3
	Parks district	3

Strategies for more effective local government

Several key factors emerged in determining how forested natural area funding and care is managed when we studied the structure of various cities. These factors were found to have the most influence on how effective a natural areas program can be. Based on these factors, the following strategies were developed.

Consolidate jurisdiction over natural areas:

Natural areas are often divided among several government agencies, which can leave them uncared for.

Jurisdictional issues are a major problem across cities because the ownership and care of forested natural areas is divided among multiple agencies. This is the case for several cities surveyed, including Atlanta, Baltimore, and Washington D.C. Management can vary greatly across landowners or may be nonexistent. The most common division is between park land and environmental or water departments. Though spreading management between multiple agencies can help advocate across divisions and bring in multiple funding sources, it hampers a centralized strategy and responsibility for forested natural areas.

Educate those in power

The perception of natural areas by leadership within parks departments and also among elected officials determines if caring for natural areas is a priority. Often natural areas are not a priority and

are low on the organizational ladder within agencies such as parks departments. This is especially the case because parks departments have a broad set of competing priorities and infrastructure to maintain. If leadership is engaged in and understands the positive outcomes of natural areas care, then these spaces will be elevated as an issue within the agency. It is therefore crucial to build relationships with leaders to educate them about the importance of forested natural areas.

Develop a dedicated natural areas program

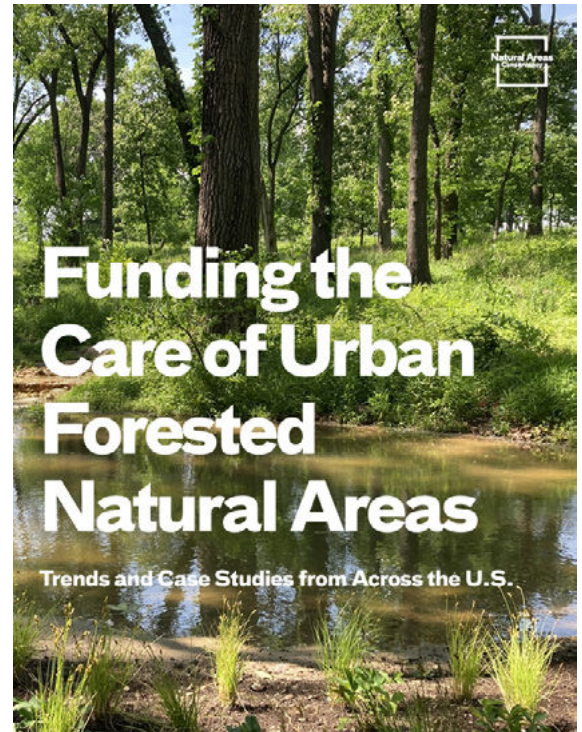
Many cities do not have a formal unit or program devoted to the care of natural areas. Having a devoted program for the care of natural areas can be a determining factor in how cities care for their forests, due to increased visibility and funding. When cities lack a dedicated program for natural areas, these services are typically performed by staff who also manage other tree-related services or park maintenance, meaning that forested natural areas are only a part-time focus. Forest management also requires specialized skills that may not be available in city government. The number of employees and funding varies greatly without a clear connection to the type of government; however, having staff dedicated to forested natural areas is an important step in their care. For examples of cities with natural areas programs you can see [New York City](#), [Boston](#) and [Portland](#).

Increase and diversify funding streams

Funding streams vary greatly between cities. Budgets dedicated to the care of forested natural areas vary greatly between cities, both in terms of dollars and in terms of funding streams. Though city tax revenue is the most common, in many cities tree care, including of forests, is tied to public utility revenue such as water and sewer or tree-restitution funds resulting from tree removal or damage. Some cities get state funds allocated specifically for natural area care. In cities with parks or forest districts, such as Chicago and Minneapolis, taxes can be levied, which insulates annual funding allocations from city budget negotiations. For more information about funding, visit the [Funding the Care of Urban Forested Natural Areas](#) report.

Engage the public

Public perception affects the political and financial management of forested natural areas. Though it does not affect management as directly as leadership or funding, the perception of the public is a powerful determinant of whether forests are managed and how. For example, an engaged public can advocate for funding



and inform politicians about the importance of prioritizing forest management in a city's budgeting process. Cities often engage members of the public through volunteer stewardship programs which get the public involved in the management of natural areas. Events and public advertising of natural areas can also help to elevate natural areas in the minds of the public.

Coordinate among tree services

It is advantageous to house tree-focused divisions together to cross-collaborate on tree-related issues in different contexts. It is common for forested natural areas to be managed either directly by tree-care divisions, or housed close together within an organization. According to survey

respondents, this is beneficial because it allows for coordination when addressing tree-related issues across the whole urban canopy. In cities where tree planting and care are divided among multiple agencies, it can be difficult to create an effective strategy or coordinate care.



Case studies

Atlanta

Atlanta has a large amount of undeveloped forested natural areas on private property and intense development pressure threatening these forests. The city is currently working to acquire and protect forested natural areas on private property using tree restitution funds. In Atlanta, the primary entity that manages natural areas is the parks department which holds nature preserves. Recently, the city created an Office of Natural Resources within the parks department dedicated to managing these spaces. The new unit manages invasive plant removal contracts, plants within natural areas, and identifies natural areas for land acquisition. The new office is seated with the arborist and forestry divisions.

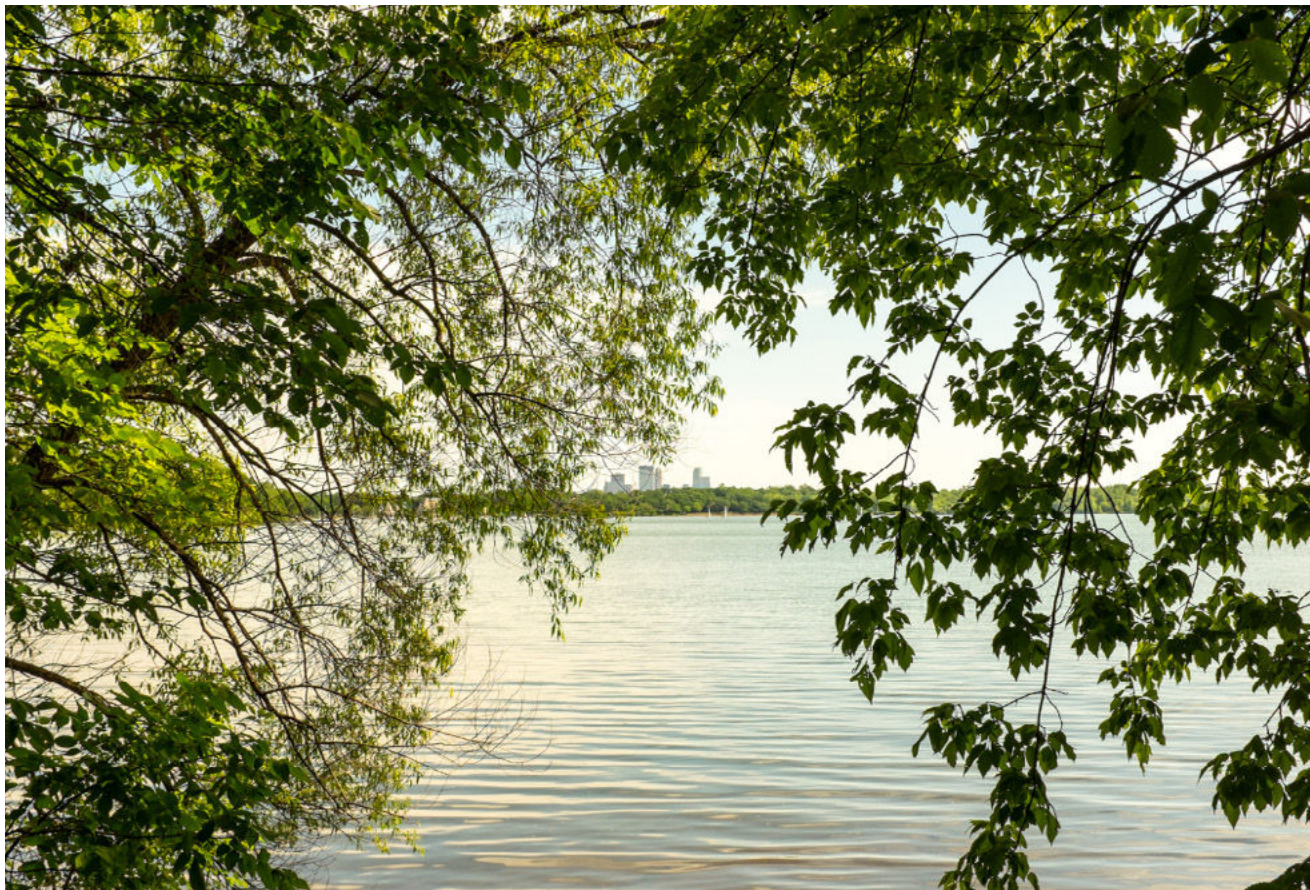
Land that contains natural areas is split between agencies—primarily between the parks department and the watershed management department among others. Coordinating maintenance and management activities can be a challenge because of the divide between agencies, with other agencies not managing forested natural areas that are under their jurisdiction. One approach could be to create common standards across agencies for assessing and managing forested natural areas. Determining how undeveloped sites containing natural areas are handled by the city government is also an opportunity to determine whether forests are developed and how they are managed.



Minneapolis

Minneapolis has a park district called the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board, which is an independent government entity that has an elected board of directors. This organization was founded in 1883, which allowed for park space throughout Minneapolis to be conserved early in the city's development allowing for ample park space around the city's water bodies. Parks districts have their benefits—notably they have their own tax authority that insulates them from competing municipal budget priorities. Additionally, the parks board is eligible for state funding for natural areas in lieu of having dedicated state parks. Other tree services are also included in the scope of the recreation board.

The parks board has elected leadership that is supportive of their established natural areas program. The support of these elected officials, which has resulted in more funding for the program, is a result of public support for natural areas. It is crucial to have the right people, both elected and working for the recreation board, in the right position at the right time. Especially those who can look beyond their current tenure—long-term planning provides a vision for how a park system will look in 100 years.



New York City

New York City has a devoted unit within the parks and recreation department called the Natural Resources Group which is in the Environment and Planning Division. This unit was established in the 1980s thanks to a natural-resource-focused commissioner and an assessment of the ecological condition of New York City's parks. Most natural areas in New York City are consolidated and managed by this unit. The Forever Wild program, which is managed by this unit, is public-facing and has a long legacy. The program includes over 12,300 designated-acres representing more than a third of New York City's parkland.

The Natural Resources Group is funded through the city tax revenue, and supplemented by grants. While this unit has persisted for 40 years, funding has been inconsistent. Recently core maintenance funding has been year-to-year instead of baselined, which leads to confusion and challenges with staffing. For more information visit [Funding Forested Natural Areas: Recent Trends in New York City](#).



Washington D.C.

In Washington D.C. forested natural areas are primarily managed by the transportation department, which is unique among Forests in Cities members. Currently, forested natural areas are divided among multiple agencies, leading to gaps in their care. Due to this split in jurisdiction, a coalition of people—including grassroots communities groups such as the Citizens Forest Health Working Group and nonprofits like Casey Trees—who care for forested natural areas in Washington D.C. are advocating for city

council legislation that creates a program dedicated to the care of forested natural areas. This new program would be created within the environmental department. It is crucial that this new unit has funding to undertake new initiatives, including mapping natural areas and creating a volunteer program. Additionally, much forested natural area in Washington D.C. is on federal land, so working with the federal government is another avenue for a successful program.



Further research

To elaborate on the relationship between local government structure and forested natural areas, it would be helpful to create summaries of what cities actually spend per acre and how many people manage natural areas per acre to compare across different cities.

A broader look at governance could take into account nonprofit and private entities along with state and federal governments.

Some suggestions from the Forests in Cities network that were not covered in this report include:

- How does structure affect funding?
- How do other cities recruit and train staff?
- Are parks or environmental departments more effective?

Having more data about Forests in Cities members can help to explore the effects that local governments are having on forested natural areas.

What you can do to advocate for change:

Governance of natural areas, specifically forested natural areas in urban environments, is an essential determinant of ecological health. More specifically, local government is important, as in most cities local governments are the primary managers of natural areas.

For proper care of forested natural areas, it is crucial for local governments to be well-organized and well-resourced. For this reason, it is beneficial to have everyone involved to advocate for the care of forested natural areas.

- 1 Identify relevant data points to build the case for protecting and investing in local forested natural areas.
- 2 Connect with other stakeholders who have a vested interest in the long-term health and care of forested natural areas (i.e. local wildlife organizations, park stewardship networks active in open spaces with natural areas, and organizations with a focus on climate change and resiliency).
- 3 Understand the local budget cycle, and the various points of public input and community engagement.
- 4 Create an informed budget platform by connecting with local land managers to understand current staffing and resource levels and aspirational levels of budget allocations.
- 5 Renew budget asks for natural areas management each budget cycle, so that the need for and prioritization of natural areas management and care remains top of mind for local decision makers each fiscal year.



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