

**SO YOU
THINK YOU'RE
READY FOR A
MANAGEMENT
PLAN**



PLANNING FOR A GREENER FUTURE

An urban forest management plan (UFMP) is a framework for ensuring your urban forestry program is moving in the right direction. It establishes a shared vision of where the community wants their urban forest to be and determines the goals, actions, and policies needed to get there.

Whether you're in a small town looking to develop a strategic plan to build support for a new program or you're part of a robust urban forestry program in a large city, having a plan for your trees helps ensure your management decisions today lead to sustainable and beneficial outcomes in the decades to come.

An urban forest management plan is a significant endeavor for any community and requires financial and political momentum to get started. As consultants for dozens of plans for cities, counties, and nonprofits, we've assembled the following best practices and considerations to help get your UFMP process off the ground.



Know The Lingo

Before we dive in, let's clarify some terminology, as there are several types of urban forest plans. The right plan for your community depends on community needs and available resources. We will use an urban forest management plan as the default end goal for the rest of this guide, but the best practices shared here are applicable to any urban forest planning document. These terms can be used interchangeably to some degree, but here are the most common definitions.

URBAN VS COMMUNITY FORESTRY

While we will default to using the term **urban forestry** in this guide, another common term is **community forestry**. Urban is not an accurate descriptor for every locale and so community forestry is a common alternative.

More
Involved



Urban Forest Master Plan

A master plan is the most comprehensive option and tends to include public and private trees in its scope—ideally, all trees in the landscapes that comprise an urban forest. The focus is often more on high-level strategies, long-term policies, and community engagement instead of specific management and operations objectives.

Urban Forest Management Plan (UFMP)

A UFMP often targets just public trees, but can include private trees. The focus is on program operations, maintenance, best practices, as well as community engagement and policy. A UFMP is not just a canopy goal, but a tailored guide for tree care professionals to proactively and effectively manage their trees for maximum, long-term benefits.

Tree Canopy Action Plan

A tree canopy action plan is focused on understanding the tree canopy and how to preserve it. This plan helps communities turn their urban tree canopy assessment data into actionable steps and is often guided by short- and long-term tree canopy goals and planting targets.

Urban Forest Maintenance Plan

An urban forest maintenance plan is usually driven by a tree inventory and lays out a prioritization strategy for tree maintenance and removals for primarily public trees. These types of plans can also provide planting strategies informed by inventory data to grow a sustainable and resilient urban forest. Urban forest maintenance plans are often developed for specific parks, arboretums, homeowner associations, university and corporate campuses, and other properties.

Less
Involved





Step 1: Defining Why Your Community Needs an Urban Forest Management Plan

What are the reasons your community will benefit from an urban forest management plan? What reasons will the city council and community at large find most compelling?

This is the information gathering stage, a time to sift through the existing data and documents and identify the biggest issues a UFMP could tackle. Here are several questions to guide this exploratory phase.

WHAT ARE THE MOST PRESSING ISSUES AND COMMUNITY NEEDS?

What are the biggest challenges or opportunities a UFMP can help address? These are leverage points that can draw the community and city council to your cause. To identify relevant needs it is helpful to work through a list of urban forest threats and benefits.

Urban Forest Benefits



Clean the air and breathe easier



Reduce stress and improve the quality of life



Build safe communities and decrease crime



Save energy and lower energy costs for buildings



Raise property value



Positively influence climate to ensure sustainability



Protect wildlife and restore ecosystems



Boost local and regional economies

Urban Forest Threats



Pests and diseases



Drought



Urban sprawl



Sea level rise



Wildfires



Invasive species



Storms and disasters



Program resources

Identifying these causes and being transparent with government leaders about how supporting the UFMP will do X, Y, and Z to improve the situation is critical to winning support.

WHICH TREES WILL BE INCLUDED?

What trees will be covered in this plan? It could be only right-of-way street trees, all public trees, or both public and private trees. It will also depend on the geographic boundary you would like the plan to cover. Answering this question early sets the scope for further research, but it is also fine to keep the possibilities open until other factors come into play, such as funding.

WHAT TREE DATA IS ALREADY AVAILABLE?

Has your community or study area completed a tree inventory? While a UFMP can be completed without a tree inventory, having location, species, size, condition, and maintenance data for public trees is a major advantage. If your community has never completed a tree inventory, we recommend prioritizing one before starting the UFMP process. At a minimum, communities can use an urban tree canopy assessment to inform a UFMP.

An urban tree canopy (UTC) assessment can be helpful for the UFMP process, as can a greenhouse gas assessment if they include a tree component. The end goal is to be able to tell the story of your urban forest. Tree inventories provide data that are great for building support, as do UTC assessments, but there are other methods for advocating the needs of your urban forest.

WHAT IS THE COMMUNITY SAYING?

Resident testimonies can be even more compelling than facts and figures. Try to explain the needs of your urban forest through the personal stories of community members. While building an empirical argument is important, framing the urban forest needs purely in dollar amounts runs the risk of commodifying tree resources. The goal is to gather enough public engagement to tell the personal side of how improving the management of public trees will improve lives.



Up With Trees

[Up With Trees](#), a nonprofit focused on urban forestry, has been operating in Tulsa, Oklahoma since 1975. When they started developing a UFMP in 2015 they completed extensive stakeholder outreach from the very beginning, including residents, the city, tree nurseries, landscape architects, and more. While they probably could have created a UFMP without all of that involvement, the time spent on public discussion really helped actualize the plan's goals and inspired non-city groups to fund some of the projects in the plan. Engaging the community early on in the process also encouraged buy-in, long-term support, and community tree stewardship.

WHAT ARE THE CITY COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES?

It's helpful to align urban forest needs with the established goals and interests of the city council. Luckily, trees have such a broad range of influence that there is almost always some shared ground. For example, pairing the creation of a UFMP with applying for the Arbor Day Foundation's [Tree City USA program](#) recognizes the hard work the city is doing and gives the city council something to celebrate each year.

Many city council priorities involve public safety, human health, recreation, community heritage, and the natural environment— all elements supported by a healthy urban forest. It is encouraged to meet with city council members one-on-one early in the process to raise awareness, gather their perspectives, and get a pulse on how the city currently views and prioritizes urban forestry.

WHAT IS ALREADY OUTLINED IN A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN OR OTHER PLANS?

Just like with city council: align, align, align.

Look for opportunities to affiliate urban forestry needs with other city plans, such as comprehensive plans, climate plans, ordinance updates, complete streets plans, green infrastructure plans, or stormwater management plans. Rolling the completion of a UFMP into other city objectives builds a broader base of support.





Step 2: Assembling the Right Team

Building enough momentum to create the UFMP requires a core group of advocates and also a wide base of supporters.

GOVERNMENT STAFF

First and foremost, any successful UFMP planning effort will need to involve the staff directly responsible for public trees, whether that is an urban forestry department, landscape maintenance, or parks and recreation.

Plenty of other government departments can benefit from a UFMP and should also be reached out to. For example, the community or social services department can rally behind more equitable distribution of tree benefits. The communications department should be looped in on what information has been gathered and will need to approve what can be shared with the public.

GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP

The earlier your organization can connect with elected officials, like the city council or the Mayor's office, the better. To win support at this level, refer to your research into what the community has been saying. We've seen great success when nonprofit groups present how a UFMP will address the documented concerns of constituents. Another tip is to go into these meetings with a clear request, such as attending an urban forestry public meeting or providing feedback on the project budget and timeline.



TREE BOARDS

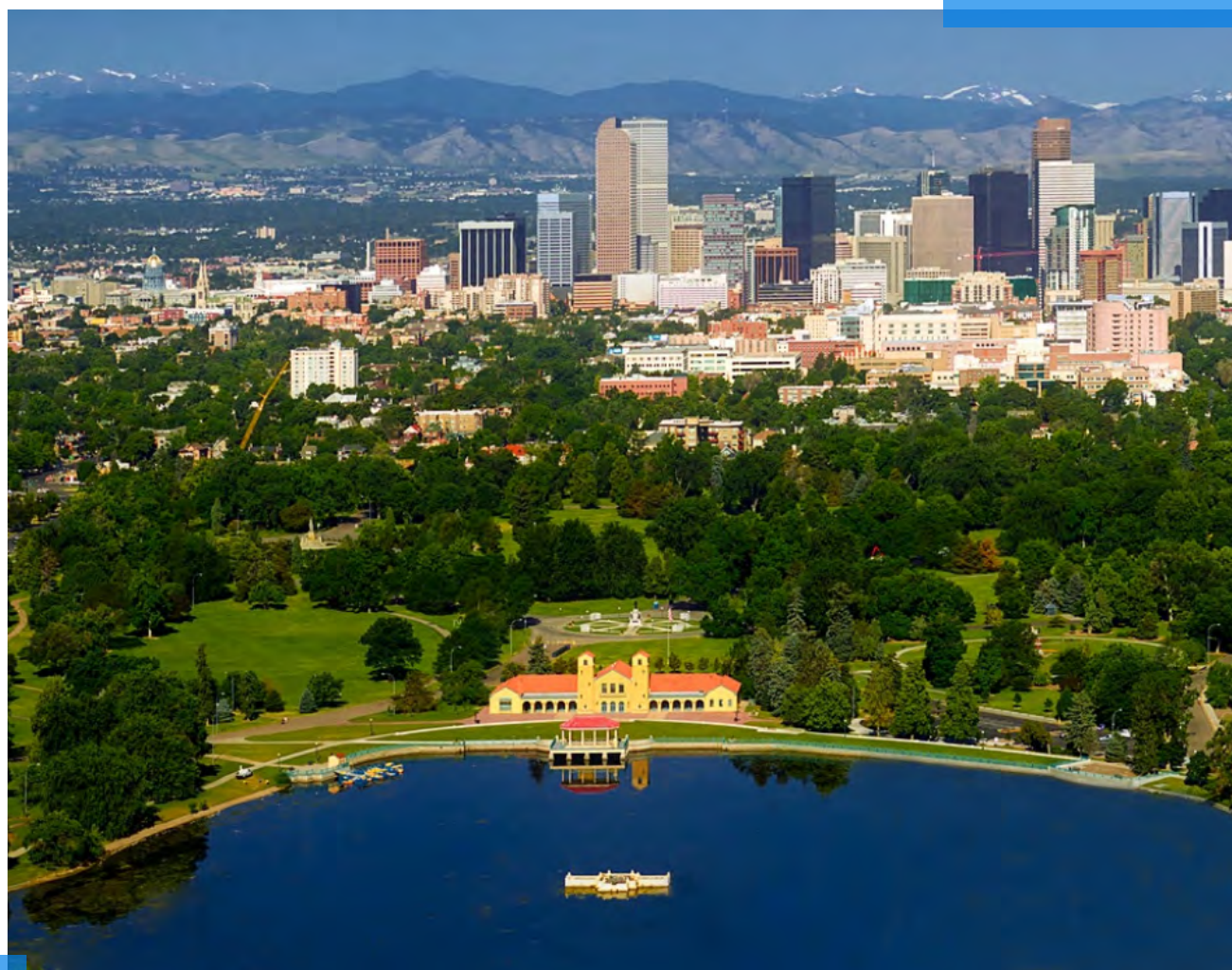
If your community has a tree board, they are superb allies for a UFMP effort. A parks board or planning commission are viable allies too. These members, whether appointed or volunteer, have demonstrated their commitment to community improvement and are likely friendly to the idea of a UFMP.

COMMUNITY OPTIONS

A healthier urban forest often overlaps with the mission of local nonprofits, so they are excellent partners to bring to your cause. Community foundations are another popular source of support and funding. Individual residents who are willing to become champions of the UFMP efforts are also valuable.

OTHER ALLIES

Some of the other collaborators we've seen help launch a UFMP include state and county agencies, especially forestry and environmental departments. Vegetation management divisions of utilities have also helped push for UFMPs, as they directly benefit from improved public tree maintenance.





Step 3: Identifying Funding

There are a variety of funding sources for a UFMP including the general fund, grants, and community fundraising. The first step in the search for funding is to develop an estimate on how much the UFMP process will cost. The estimate will be guided by your answers to some of the general scoping questions in Step 1, such as which trees will be included, how quickly the plan needs to be completed, and if there will need to be supplemental studies, like an ordinance review or recommended tree lists.

This step is commonly facilitated by an outside consultant. The [Urban Forestry Consulting](#) team at PlanIT Geo™ has often helped communities with initial budget planning sessions and drafting requests for proposals (RFPs).

If the total cost estimate seems unworkable, remember a UFMP can be part of a modular process. Expenses can be distributed across several years as component steps are completed. For example, Tacoma, WA created a progressive suite of plans, starting with a [Research Summary](#), followed by an [Urban Forest Management Plan](#) the next year, and then a [Strategic Urban Forest Action Plan](#) a year after that. In future planning efforts, the city will develop supplemental plans and studies to their UFMP such as a tree risk reduction plan, trees and sidewalk conflicts plan, and a sustained funding report.

In Florida, the [Managing Community Forests Grant Program](#) is designed specifically for a modular planning process. Selected communities receive a total of three contracts over a three-year period to conduct a tree inventory, establish an urban forest master plan, and then undertake a planting project to meet goals identified in the master plan.

When applying for grants, make sure to personalize your application to fit the topical and locally relevant themes of the year. That could mean focusing on storm recovery, climate resilience, or tree equity depending on your location. If successful, the grant timelines will influence your schedule, so be prepared to alter the UFMP project to fit accordingly.

One caveat: Though we've put Identifying Funding at Step 3, it should be thought of from the beginning. It takes a significant investment to develop a quality UFMP, so be wary to not commit too much time and energy to this project without having identified some sources of funds. For additional ideas on funding sources, check out our guide, [How To Fund Your Urban Forestry Program](#).



Step 4: Starting the UFMP Process

With the who, why, and how (to fund) figured out, you are just about ready to start planning. We've got a few final tips to start this process on the right foot.

TIMING

Are there other projects currently in the works? If it's a project like a tree inventory or canopy assessment, then it's probably worth delaying the UFMP so you can leverage the information of those completed projects.

On the flip side, if you know the city will be developing a climate action plan or updating its comprehensive plan, it may prove beneficial to develop the UFMP before these other planning efforts take place. In this way, the UFMP can inform urban forestry elements within these planning efforts rather than having to react to what is in a separate plan.

Also critical is when in the year does the urban forester, city arborist, or other managers with tree duties have time to spend planning a UFMP? Special events or holidays, such as Arbor Day, can be very time consuming, as can the city budget planning period. Similarly, a UFMP planning process will need to align with the city's fiscal timing, or if your UFMP planning is operating with grant funding, then you will need to work within the grant cycle.

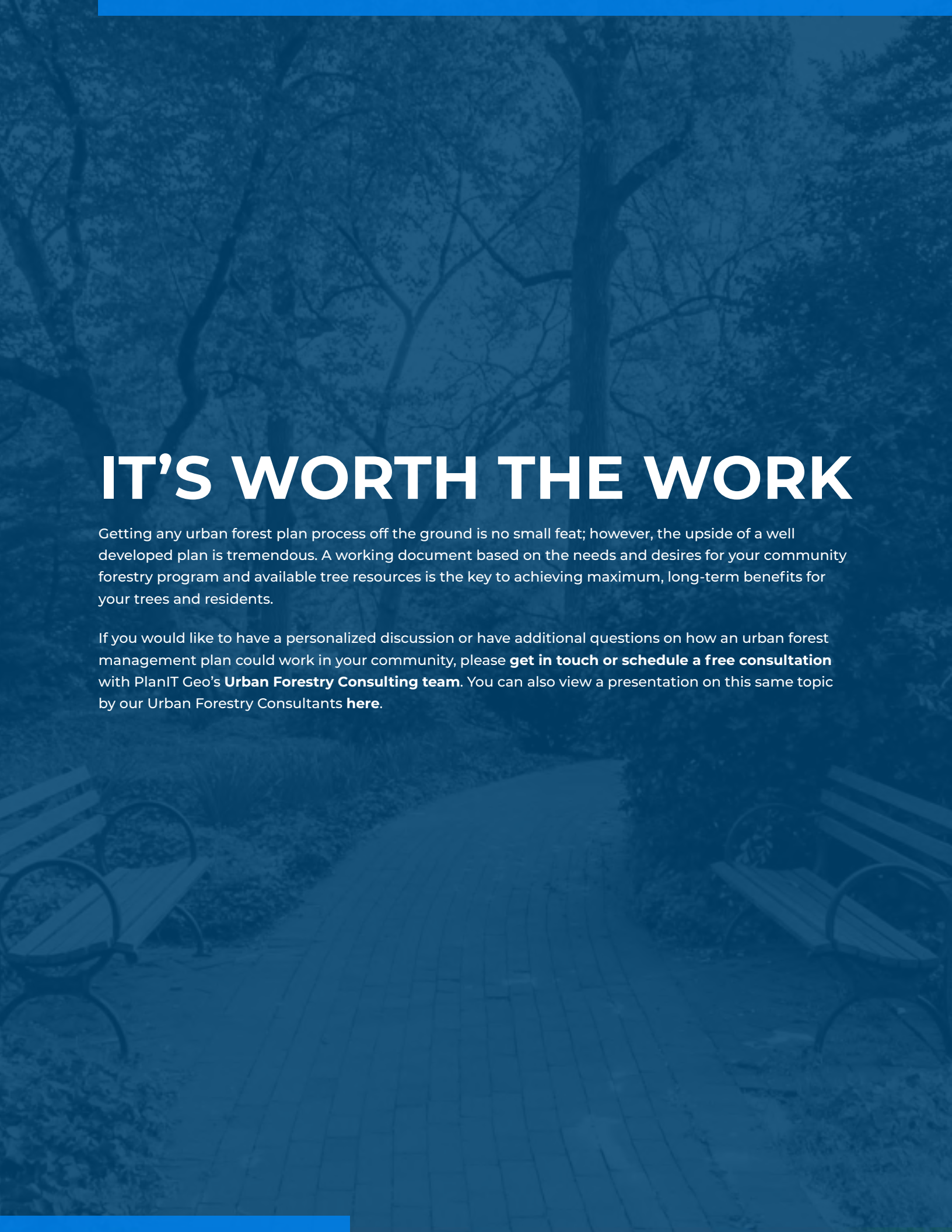
Another aspect of staff timing is if there will be any upcoming transitions. If an urban forester is preparing to leave, it can be an ideal time to push for a UFMP, so there is a clear direction and set of instructions in place for their successor.

ASSIGN ROLES

From the team of committed parties you've assembled, it's helpful to assign who will take on core responsibilities, such as leadership roles, and the varying levels of responsibility expected for collaborators, both in and outside of the city. As you are evaluating who will do what, this is also a time to consider what can be done in-house and what would best be done by a consultant.

HOUSEKEEPING

Finally, in the ramp up to a UFMP plan it's important to update and organize relevant records and files so you can hit the ground running. This can include tree inventory data, organizational charts, service request records, and department budgets for any group working with public trees. It's also helpful to start organizing contacts and building email lists for who you want to reach out to during the planning process. This information can take awhile to pull together, so an early start is beneficial, especially when a consultant and billable time becomes a factor.

A blue-tinted photograph of a park. In the foreground, a brick path leads towards the background. On either side of the path are trees and park benches. The overall scene is serene and natural.

IT'S WORTH THE WORK

Getting any urban forest plan process off the ground is no small feat; however, the upside of a well developed plan is tremendous. A working document based on the needs and desires for your community forestry program and available tree resources is the key to achieving maximum, long-term benefits for your trees and residents.

If you would like to have a personalized discussion or have additional questions on how an urban forest management plan could work in your community, please **get in touch or schedule a free consultation** with PlanIT Geo's **Urban Forestry Consulting team**. You can also view a presentation on this same topic by our Urban Forestry Consultants **here**.