

2020

Cross Sector Partnerships – Development of the Chicago Region Trees Initiative

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Recommended Citation

Scott, Lydia; Miller, Karen Ann; McCarthy, Joseph; Freer, Matthew; Darling, Lindsay; and Custic, Melissa (2020) "Cross Sector Partnerships – Development of the Chicago Region Trees Initiative," *Cities and the Environment (CATE)*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 19.

DOI: 10.15365/cate.2020.130119

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/cate/vol13/iss1/19>

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Cross Sector Partnerships – Development of the Chicago Region Trees Initiative

The Chicago Region Trees Initiative (CRTI) is a partnership of more than 200 organizations across the seven county Chicago metro region. The CRTI believes that trees are critical to our quality of life, and its mission is to ensure that trees are more healthy, abundant, diverse, and equitably distributed to provide needed benefits to all people and communities in the Chicago region. Our key goals are to inspire people to value trees, increase the Chicago region's tree canopy, reduce threats to trees, and enhance oak ecosystems. The CRTI has built upon the work and programs of others, and the experience of partners to shape the urban forest in the Chicago region by 2050.

Keywords

private public partnerships, urban natural areas management, urban trees, urban forest

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INTRODUCTION

The Chicago Region Trees Initiative (CRTI) is a partnership of more than 200 organizations across the seven county Chicago metro region. The CRTI believes that trees are critical to our quality of life, and its mission is to ensure that trees are more healthy, abundant, diverse, and equitably distributed to provide needed benefits to all people and communities in the Chicago region. Our key goals are to inspire people to value trees, increase the Chicago region's tree canopy, reduce threats to trees, and enhance oak ecosystems. The CRTI has built upon the work and programs of others, and the experience of partners to shape the urban forest in the Chicago region by 2050.

CONTEXT

The urban forest in the Chicago region is in decline. We have gone from 20% in 2010 to 18% in 2020. Since 2010, we have lost 13 million trees to emerald ash borer. We have low species and age diversity, 73% percent of our trees are less than six inches in diameter; our native systems are not regenerating; and these native systems are severely fragmented with only 17% remaining. There is little understanding and limited resources to support the urban forest, critical infrastructure that supports our physical and mental health, improves our air and water quality, reduces flooding, improves the economy, and reduces impacts of climate change. And, importantly, this urban forest is not equitably distributed or cared for.

To halt this trajectory, a partnership was formed with fourteen leading organizations across the seven county Chicago metro-region. Because CRTI's work is based in science, one of the largest data sets on urban tree canopy in the country was collected along with demographic, health, flooding, heat, air quality, and other relevant information to provide a sound base for development of the CRTI Master Plan (2019-2050).

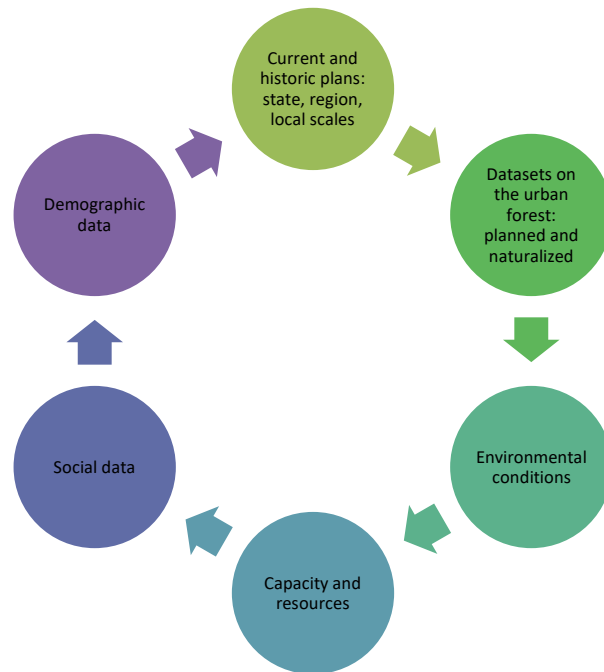


Figure 1. Types of data sets upon which the CRTI Master Plan and action is based.

Reference Datasets and Plans:

- Chicago 2007 and 2010 and 2020 regional Tree Censuses
- Tree Initiative of Chicago
- LiDAR Analysis for each county (7)
- Medicaid Claims Maps
- Heat Island Maps
- Flood Maps
- Air Quality Maps
- Oak 1830's, 1939, and 2010 mapping
- Operations Capacity Survey (looking at the capacity of a community to care for its trees)
- Chicago Climate Action Plan
- Chicago Park District Strategic Plan
- Greenest Region Compact 2
- Restore the Canopy. Plant A Tree!
- Urban Canopy Assessment
- CMAP On To 2050
- Forest Preserves of Cook County Next Century Conservation
- Kane County Green Infrastructure Plan
- Chicago Wilderness Green Infrastructure
- 2010 U.S. Census
- 65 public tree inventories

GOALS

The CRTI held public meetings across all seven counties and, along with the Executive Advisory Council and four work groups, defined the CRTI Master Plan. The vision for CRTI is that the Chicago region will be the most verdant, most livable, most resilient region in North America. CRTI's mission trees are critical to achieving this vision. We will ensure that trees are healthier, more abundant, more diverse, and more equitably distributed to provide needed benefits to all people and communities that live in the Chicago region. The Master Plan identified four key goals: inspire people to value trees, increase the Chicago region's tree canopy, reduce threats to trees, and enhance oak ecosystems.

APPROACH USED

CRTI is standing on the shoulders of a broad partnership and has drawn from the expertise of the following individuals and organizations:

- Public landowners and managers: Municipalities (284), Park Districts (175), and Counties (7)
- Local, county and regional planning organizations: Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, Metropolitan Planning Council, Kane County Planning Department, municipal planners, and the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus
- Forest preserves and conservation districts (7): Cook, Lake, Kane, Kendall, and McHenry County Forest Preserves and the McHenry County Conservation District
- Professional associations: Illinois Arborist Association, Illinois Green Industry Association, Illinois Landscape Contractors Association, and the Illinois Association of Landscape Architects
- Transportation agencies: Illinois Department of Transportation, Illinois Tollway, and county and local DOTs.
- Watershed and stormwater agencies: Metropolitan Water Reclamation District
- Federal and state conservation organizations: Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Illinois Department of Agriculture, and the U.S. Forest Service
- Botanical gardens: The Morton Arboretum
- Universities: DePaul University, University of Illinois, Ball State University, Loyola University Chicago, and Southern Illinois University
- Non-profits: Openlands, Student Conservation Association, The Nature Conservancy, Tree Fund, Greencorps, and School of the Art Institute of Chicago
- Councils of government: Metropolitan Mayors Caucus and South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association
- Neighborhood groups: Blacks in Green, Faith in Place, Latinos Progressando, and Homan Grown

All of these groups interact with, own, manage, or impact the urban forest and have a vested interest in its condition.

The CRTI Master Plan was developed between 2016 and 2019. Meetings to get input and direction were held in each of the seven counties and with partners. Participants were introduced to the value and benefits of trees, the current state of the urban forest in the Chicago region, and

asked to identify what their priorities and challenges were. In addition, partners in the four CRTI workgroups (Trees and Green Infrastructure, Tree Stewardship and Planting, Risk Assessment and Management, and Forest Composition and Analysis) were asked to identify key goals and outcomes. Input provided by these partners resulted in the CRTI Master Plan.

CHALLENGES

We have had great successes and have wonderful partners but there have been some challenges. Some groups or individuals have adopted a wait-and-see approach to determine if there is value to getting involved. There has been some unfamiliarity with the practice of working in a collective where credit may not be as directly received as it is in other arrangements. Funding for the collaboration has been challenging as development staff in the various organizations are reluctant to share contacts or opportunities. Every organization has a bottom line so that there is little time or resources for something that does not directly benefit them. And there is also a loss of autonomy when working collaboratively.

With the completion of the Master Plan, more clarity has been provided and organizations are able to identify where they have a role and how they fit within the partnership. Partners are stepping up to take the lead on specific issues related to their goals and strategies. Name recognition is beginning to take place and an understanding of being part of something bigger than themselves has increased value.

RESOURCES

The Morton Arboretum founded CRTI and has provided the operating and leadership funds for the partnership. However, partners have selected and fund projects that support the goals of the master plan and their internal plans. The CRTI has worked together to apply for grants and has partnered in the data collection and analysis, providing staff time and expertise. Collectively the partnership is focused with the help of the Master Plan.

KEY RESULTS

Key results of the Master Plan include

- Formation of a coalition with common goals: By providing partners' input into the plan they have ownership in it. By incorporating in their concerns and needs and identifying potential solutions partners are invested in its success.
- Identification of key needs and problems: By understanding what partner needs and problems are we can work collectively to address them. We can also see that our problems and needs are not unique. We can learn from each other how to solve these problems because we have them in common.
- Prioritization: Through prioritization we can focus attention on the most pressing problems. For instance, we have identified communities with the highest needs and least capacity to plant and care for trees. We also know these same communities often have equity issues. If

we prioritize our programs to train their staff and decision makers, help them with their ordinances and policies, provide mentoring, and build citizen stewardship, we can help to equalize our canopy in the region.

- Identification of partner skills and resources to achieve goals: We have surveyed our partners to identify what their challenges and needs are so we can focus our programs, outreach, and partnering to reduce those challenges and improve those skills. The Community Tree Network (CTN) is one such opportunity. The CTN is a mentoring program that provides opportunities for partners to get together and share what is working and what is not with each other, peer to peer.



Image 1. City of Chicago Forester teaching tree planting techniques for balled and burlapped trees at a Community Tree Network.

- Implementation: Implementation of the Master Plan is planned for six five-year phases. In Phase I, The Foundation Phase, we are focusing on our first goal: Inspire people to value trees. By starting with this as a base we will be able to get people to stop and take a look at the trees around them, understand that they need proper care and planting, inspire them to care for the trees on their properties (70% of all of our trees), advocate in their communities for better policies and leadership that supports trees, and get them to be active tree stewards in their communities.

Example in Kane County

The CRTI Master Plan supports and has helped inform the Kane County 2040 Green Infrastructure Plan to protect the environment and restore the unique and fragile environments associated with the geography of Kane County and to enhance and expand Kane County's green infrastructure network by providing functional connections between water resources, natural areas, forest preserves, cultural and historic sites and communities. The plan, through the goal to *enhance oak ecosystems* brings together property owners (including the forest preserve district and private property owners) with significant oak woodlands in the Big Rock area. This work helps these landowners learn about the importance of these historical oak remnants, best

management strategies, reduced fragmentation, and expanded protection. Additionally the plan helps address stormwater management as a significant water resource in the area. Some of the property owners are adjacent to each other, offering potential natural resource connections.

- *To foster public awareness, education, and support of environmental and open space management* through the use of the publications produced by the CRTI which provide excellent graphical assistance to local government staff as they interact with the public.
- *To promote green infrastructure best management practices in order to capture stormwater for groundwater recharge and protect water quality* through the use of CRTI publications and presentations by CRTI staff and local government staff on the importance of tree canopy, management plans, and tree preservation ordinances.
- *Develop an oak tree restoration program including a tree preservation ordinance* through outreach to property owners in the Big Rock area and the development of the tree preservation ordinance templates for use by local governments.

Example in the City of Chicago

The City of Chicago has limited resources for forestry funding. Their forestry professionals are active partners in CRTI and can share their expertise and how they work with limited resources—even though the scale at which they work is beyond the comprehension of most other municipal foresters. They are open to working with CRTI partners and support tree planting programs in the City of Chicago and resident education. CRTI partners can assist the Forestry Department by working with City leadership and advise on policy when the Forestry Department cannot.

Example Oak Ecosystem Recovery Plan

CRTI has been successful in getting priority oak ecosystems identified in each of the counties covering 123,000 acres of oak ecosystems and is actively working with each county forest preserve/conservation district to identify priority areas where they can work collaboratively with private landowners to improve ecosystem function and biological diversity.



Image 2. CRTI Annual Meeting and Celebration Event hosted by the Chicago Park District