

An Urban Forest Plan with a Focus on Equity

Providence, RI Example

Urban Forests clean our air and water and cool our cities.

Urban forests play a critical role in city sustainability goals as they reduce pollutants in the air and storm water runoff, mitigate heat and noise, and provide places for recreations and community interaction. Each of these benefits can impact the health, environmental, and social aspect of neighborhoods. Yet, disadvantaged neighborhoods suffer from unequal distribution of tree canopy in cities.



Figure 1 (Source: PVD Summary Sheet)

Urban Forests are not equitably distributed within our city.

Communities that lack tree canopy or greenspaces may already be vulnerable in different ways (Figure 2). For example, neighborhoods with lower tree canopy distribution are often home to communities with lower income. More often than not these neighborhoods rank least in contributing to climate change but feel the full effects, such as heat waves, flooding, etc. Planting and increasing urban tree canopy in a strategic manner can help improve these communities and attempt to equally distribute the benefits associated with tree canopy.

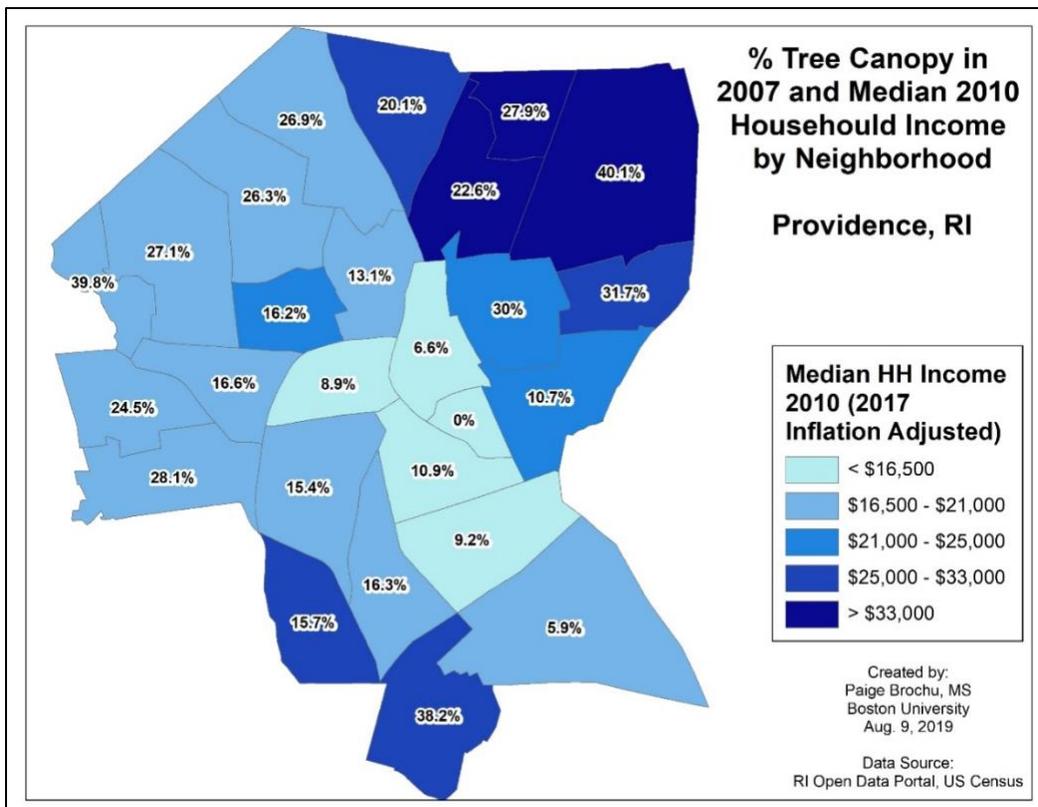


Figure 2: Tree Canopy and Median Income Distribution for Providence, RI by Neighborhood.

Data-driven community engagement empowers residents to create greener and healthier environments.

Community engagement fosters social cohesion and interaction among neighborhoods and creates a sense of pride for a new project. Identifying areas of highest need for increased tree canopy based on environmental, health, and social data can inform where community engaged action needs to take place to ensure an equitable distribution of an urban tree canopy. Cities across the US have been incorporating this goal into their UFPs in order to understand the barriers and opportunities in which this unequal distribution has occurred and potential solutions with the help of these affected communities.

Examples:

- *Portland, OR:* Created a Community Advisory Committee to review project outcomes and recommendations. This committee was made up of those from communities with low-income, and low-canopy – therefore their input was vital for Portland’s UFP.
- *Pittsburgh, PA:* In order to achieve their UFP goals of Connecting and Engaging for a 20-year vision, the plan outlines recommendations in order to ensure equal access to urban forests and their subsequent benefits. Such as prioritizing neighborhoods for future planting and maintenance, engaging the volunteering from disadvantages neighborhoods, and utilize vacant properties to increase tree canopy.
- *Cleveland, OH:* Outlined an equitable approach within their UFP with the “Right Tree, Right Place, and Right Purpose” strategy. This strategy incorporates establishing partnerships, implementing outreach and education, and instituting policy changes.

Although these are recent UFPs and we made not see the full effects of their goals yet, each have outlined a plan to make equitable distribution of the urban forest a key focus.

Incorporating alternative recommendations into the UFP.

Within the urban forest plan the need to outline alternative recommendations for areas that may not be able to increase tree canopy due to high volume of pavement and buildings, is beneficial. Alternatives can include greens roofs, white roofs, and planting of shrubs or conversions of vacant lots to community gardens that can have similar environmental, health, and social impacts.

An equitable urban forest plan can simultaneously impact the environment, health, and social aspect of neighborhoods and communities.