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Yale SCHOOL OF THE ENVIRONMENT
The Forest School



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URBAN ISSUES

NEWSLETTER OF THE URBAN RESOURCES INITIATIVE AT THE
YALE SCHOOL OF THE ENVIRONMENT



Photo credit: Anna Pickett

First Community Forum held in November, 2023.

COMMUNITY RE-ENVISIONING OF NEW HAVEN PARKS

by Leah Snavelly

URI is locally known as an organization that supports environmental collaboration and participatory decision-making, in particular through its long-running Community Greenspace program. In fact, I was first trained in facilitation by URI staff during my time as a Community Greenspace intern in the summer of 2020 as I worked with the city's residents to support community greening projects. Yet between October 2023–January 2024, URI widened its role to facilitate even further community engagement in the entire New Haven park system.

This past October, URI was selected by the city of New Haven to conduct a community-listening process that would guide how the city could

restructure the management of its parks. The need for this process was driven by community frustration over the merger of the Parks and Public Works Departments in 2020.

Rather than just separate out the departments again, Mayor Justin Elicker noted that he "...wanted to hear from the community about what was not working and do something a little bit more comprehensive and innovative...to help the city think differently." URI proposed a Community Input Process that was broken out into three phases: Listening, Co-Create, and Finalize.

The URI team was joined by Liz Felker, a professional facilitator with The Forests Dialogue, who led the overall process.

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FROM THE DIRECTOR



Achieving milestones—whether planting a target number of trees or an anniversary marking time—offers a chance to reflect. In the spring of 2022, our cover article written by Caroline Scanlan, URI's former GreenSkills Manager, described how URI, with many partners, reached a goal of planting 10,000 trees. We are approaching another milestone—this summer marks the 30th anniversary of URI's Community Greenspace program. Three decades of community-driven volunteers' continuous efforts to restore, reclaim, and revive our city's greenspaces I find remarkable. We are

making plans to celebrate their accomplishments, as they warrant heartfelt gratitude and recognition. In this newsletter's cover story, forestry graduate student Leah Snively shares some of URI's winter work leading a community-input process to provide insights for the mayor to consider our recommendations to restructure the management of the city's parks. I was humbled that URI was trusted to lead this process and believe it was our long-standing history of working in thoughtful partnership with both community volunteers and city staff.

Building trust is an essential foundation for both our Greenspace and GreenSkills programs and requires investment. In his article Under the Canopy of Hope, intern Jack Hatajik writes of how staff and volunteer Tree Ambassadors make time to knock on doors and encourage residents to get involved by adopting a free tree to be planted by our GreenSkills crews. As we ambitiously aim to plant another 1,000 trees this year, we carefully plan outreach to engage the community so that we plant where they will be the most needed.

Just as we ensure careful advance planning prior to planting, as Yale post-graduate Michael Freiburger explains, we also revisit every tree post-planting to guarantee their long-term success. Over the winter months, each tree we planted five years ago is pruned to improve their form and future growth.

I am grateful to be part of this dedicated team of volunteers, partners, donors, and staff, who collectively make these achievements possible. Every season, we grow more dynamic together, building upon our success and striving to accomplish even more.

Colleen Murphy-Dunning

URI Spring Events

Every Saturday 10 a.m. — 2 p.m.

Visit Trowbridge Environmental Center in East Rock Park for free coffee, hot cocoa, and Olmo's bagels. The first and third Saturdays include volunteering with Friends of East Rock Park from 10 a.m. to noon. Big shout-out to Olmo for sponsoring this series of events!

All Greenspace and Tree Ambassador volunteer events are posted on URI's Sign-up Genius webpage: tinyurl.com/NHVgreenspace

April 13 — Rock to Rock Day of Service Tree Planting.

Sign up to volunteer at rocktorock.org

April 16 — Milestone Tree Planting on Hillhouse Ave.

Sign up to volunteer at uri.yale.edu/get-involved/events

April 27 — Rock to Rock Earth Day Ride/Walk.

Register to ride/walk at rocktorock.org! Sign up to donate or raise funds for URI at <https://givegreater.cfgnh.org/campaigns/2024-uri-rocks>

May 18 — First New Haven Botanical Garden of Healing Volunteer Workday of the season.

Join every Saturday morning mid-May through mid-August. Sign up at tinyurl.com/BGHvolunteer

June 8 — Annual Day of Remembrance at the Botanical Garden of Healing Dedicated to Victims of Gun Violence.

Registration required at uri.yale.edu/get-involved/events



Volunteers planting a tree in East Rock Park.

Photo credit: URI Staff

Community Re-Envisioning of New Haven Parks

by Leah Snively (continued from page 1)

The Listening Phase consisted of a community survey with respondents across all New Haven neighborhoods, parks staff surveys, meetings with the parks senior staff, and four stakeholder focus groups led by Felker. She utilized Mentimeter (an online voting tool) during the focus group meetings to capture participants' input and prioritize strengths and needed improvements that they identified.

As a rapporteur for the focus groups, I had the opportunity to hear passionate New Haven leaders express the changes they would like to see within the parks system so that they might better serve their community's needs. The Parks Friends focus group members highlighted the current inequities in the park system, particularly within environmental justice neighborhoods, and the need for improved communication. Other focus groups singled out the need for improved programming and athletic fields maintenance and infrastructure. These firsthand accounts complemented the results of the 320 survey responses, which called for improved litter management, trails and paths, mowing, natural areas, and park equipment. Overall, participants of both the survey and the focus groups were grateful for the natural areas and beauty that the various parks provide to New Haven residents and beyond.

URI staff then synthesized these results into four major categories, Accountability and Transparency, Equity, Communications, and Improving Services, which were carried forward into the first Community Forum under the Co-Create Phase in November. Members of the New Haven community, including many who had

engaged in the Listening Phase in some way, were invited to join a conversation on how the New Haven park system might improve within these four themes. Everyone was given sticky notes on which they could add suggestions that fell within these categories, during which time they shared in small groups about aspects they thought should be included in the new direction of New Haven parks. These suggestions were then ranked as each person placed three sticky-dots next to the themes that they thought were most important.

After this Co-Create Phase, URI staff prepared a draft report with recommendations for the city to consider how to restructure management units and improve equity and effectiveness within the parks system. The recommendations included case studies from other cities that could address the community concerns, citing a variety of management-structure options as well as specific actions that could respond to priority concerns identified in the Co-Create Phase. After an initial review in December with Mayor Elicker and his senior staff, highlights from the report were presented at the final Community Forum in January 2024. After a presentation of the report highlights, community members who attended the forum were split into breakout groups to discuss their thoughts on URI's recommendations and to bring up any gaps that might still be present.

At the January forum Mayor Elicker also shared his intention to separate Public Works and Parks into two separate departments, with a Parks Director leading a newly formed Parks Department. He also has noted that the department restructure will likely follow one



Photo credit: Anna Pickett

Final Community Forum held in January, 2024.

of URI's recommendations, by establishing three or four geographic zones across the city each with their own Deputy Director, Park Ranger, and maintenance team. In addition, the mayor suggested hiring a Superintendent of Athletic Fields to help alleviate the current issues with upkeep of fields and courts.

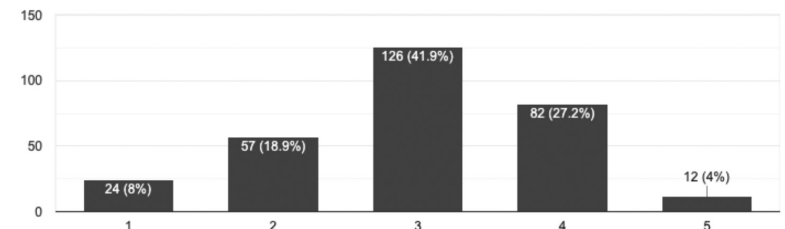
Mayor Elicker closed the forum with a call to the attendees to remain involved in the next phase of the process. He noted that he would recommend increases in the budget for the upcoming fiscal year to carry out the needed

improvements, but added that the Alders ultimately vote on the budget. The mayor encouraged those attending the forum to come to public hearings on the budget and continue to show their support to fund the changes that they want to see in the New Haven parks system.

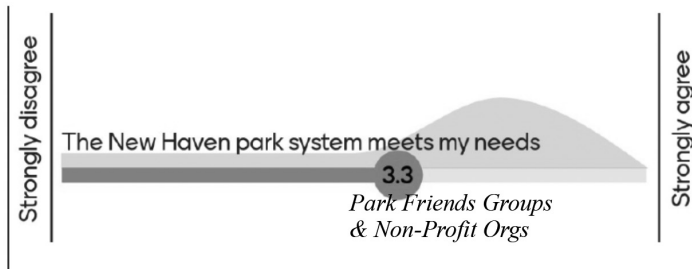
More information on the community listening process, including process snapshots from each engagement phase and URI's final report, can be found on URI's website: <https://uri.yale.edu/get-involved/gathering-ideas-re-envision-parks>

Survey Question: How well do you think the sports/recreation facilities are maintained (Farmington Canal, basketball courts, tennis courts, pickleball courts, bocce courts, skate parks, soccer fields, baseball fields, ice rink, rugby fields, cricket pitches, etc.)?

301 responses



Responses ranked on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being badly and 5 being excellently.



Shaping the Elm City's Future Canopy

by Michael Freiburger

Trees that grow in forests are naturally equipped to adapt and thrive in their environment and are generally self-maintaining. In contrast, street trees are introduced to urban settings vastly different from their native habitats. These new surroundings demand extensive care and management, with pruning essential to their health and to avoid conflicts within the tight constraints of the streetscape. This winter, as part of URI's annual pruning initiative, we carefully tended to over 500 trees across New Haven to enhance their health and structural integrity, paying special mind to the iconic elms that give our city its name.

Our pruning strategy is preventive and prescriptive, focusing on nurturing the trees from a young age to deter potential future issues. This is especially true for our elm trees, which receive our attention three years after planting. In comparison, all other trees are pruned five years after planting. By concentrating on early shaping for proper form and structure, we reduce future maintenance requirements and encourage the trees to develop in a way that's both healthy and harmonious with their urban surroundings.

Our approach to pruning is as much an art as it is a science, tailored to each tree's natural growth pattern and the unique demands of the urban landscape. One key aspect of this process involves addressing competing leaders—a term referring to codominant branches striving to become the main trunk. This scenario can result in structural weaknesses and increase the likelihood of future tree failure. By selectively pruning these competing leaders early on, we ensure a single, strong central trunk, which is fundamental for the tree's overall stability and aesthetic form.

The importance of early intervention is particularly pronounced in the case of our elms, given their susceptibility to Dutch Elm Disease (DED). Fortunately, young elms exhibit a higher resilience to DED and respond positively to early pruning interventions. Their rapid growth in the initial years makes them especially responsive to shaping, allowing them to recover quickly and vigorously. This early care sets the foundation for a robust maturity, with pruning specifically directed to encourage the iconic umbrella or vase shape that has become emblematic of New Haven's urban landscape.

The techniques we employ, such as reduction and removal cuts, promote a balanced and natural growth structure, ensuring that each tree can develop a strong, resilient form. Our goal with pruning is multifaceted: We aim to reduce risk, improve public safety and accessibility, remove diseased or damaged limbs, and guide the tree's development to suit its role in the urban ecosystem, whether as a lush understory tree or a towering shade tree.

Pruning in the urban context is a delicate balancing act, thoughtfully selecting and guiding each tree's growth. We adhere to a principle of moderation, mindful never to remove more than a third of a tree's foliage at any one time to avoid undue stress on these living urban resources.

This winter's pruning campaign has been more than just a maintenance routine; it's been a dedication to preserving and enhancing New Haven's green legacy. Through careful and strategic planning, we cultivate a resilient, flourishing urban forest that will stand as a testament to the city's love and respect for its natural heritage, especially the celebrated elms that are so much a part of our identity as the Elm City.



Photo credit: Brandon Wilson-Radcliffe

Yale graduate student Tashi takes to the streets for URI's annual winter pruning initiative.

Under the Canopy of Hope

by Jack Hatajik

It all starts with a knock. Since 2010, URI has planted an average of 500 trees annually. Through the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) of 2022, the United States Forest Service is investing a historic \$1 billion in urban forestry nationwide to reduce heat and address environmental inequalities. Fortunately, URI is one of the Forest Service grant recipients, supporting the doubling of trees planted over the next five years. Starting this spring, we will produce an additional 500 trees per year in New Haven's Environmental Justice (EJ) communities.

In 2023, the Earth's average surface temperature was the highest in recorded history. More frequent and severe heat waves will significantly impact human health, especially in urban areas. The Urban Heat Island Effect (UHI) is a phenomenon in which urban areas are warmer than rural areas due to human infrastructure's retaining more of the sun's heat. UHI also increases energy costs, air pollution, and heat-related illnesses.

Moreover, the impacts of UHI disproportionately affect marginalized communities of color. For example, Dr. Karen Seto is leading a research team with NASA support to document temperature changes across Connecticut's major cities over time. Several neighborhoods in New Haven are much cooler and can have upwards of three times more trees than others. Staggeringly, more land in Fair Haven is covered by parking lots than by parks and schoolyards, resulting in hotter summer temperatures. Recent IRA investments prioritize these issues by funding tree planting in these communities.

In a local effort to reverse these inequities, URI is committed to connecting with community members in EJ neighborhoods and planting more trees in these areas. Trees lower surface temperature by providing lasting shade and circulating water throughout the atmosphere. Combined with a tree's ability to increase aesthetic and property value, they can also reduce energy costs, air pollutants, and stormwater runoff. To ensure the survival of these trees, URI only plants where we are invited and have tree adopters committed to watering them.

Due to having the lowest canopy cover in the city, URI is focusing outreach in Fair Haven. We are grateful to the volunteer Tree Ambassadors who have been canvassing there to encourage residents to reduce heat in their own space by adopting a free tree. This engagement has led to valuable conversations between residents about the effects of climate change in urban areas and how trees can help. Fostering community dialogue will be paramount as we face more severe climate challenges. Our Tree Ambassadors are at the forefront of this effort and are essential for connecting URI's work to those who need it the most.

Please contact URI if you want to adopt a free tree or join our Tree Ambassadors team. You can find more information on our website (uri.yale.edu) or call us at 203-432-6189. It all starts with a knock. If you answer, you will be invited to go on an unexpected journey to adopt a tree that will grow to symbolize the strength of your community. And...you will get some much-needed shade!



Photo credit: Anna Pickett

Tree Ambassadors Lee Cruz and Melinda Tuhus meeting potential tree adopter.