Reflecting Raleigh

THE NEXT COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Raleigh Planning

Branching Out: Trees and Urban Ecosystems

Community Conversation Summary

This report consolidates key discussions, themes, and action points from all tables at Branching Out: Trees and Urban Ecosystems on March 18, 2025. The event was part of the public engagement series for Reflecting Raleigh: The Next Comprehensive Plan, hosted by City of Raleigh Planning, Parks, and Community Engagement staff. Attendees were randomly assigned to one of twelve tables for three rounds of facilitated discussion following a brief presentation on Raleigh's urban forest. Volunteer table hosts posed guiding questions in each round:

- **Round 1:** Raleigh is expected to continue to grow. In what areas of the city should Raleigh focus new development to accommodate this growth, and why?

- **Round 2:** Which groups do you believe are responsible for supporting and protecting Raleigh's natural resources? What are their specific responsibilities, and how should they coordinate their efforts?

- **Round 3:** Have you heard of tree protection or expansion programs in other cities that you think could work in Raleigh? What partnerships should Raleigh pursue to improve or expand existing programs?

Key Themes

Equity and Tree Access

Participants stressed the need for equitable distribution of tree canopy, highlighting disparities between neighborhoods. They called for targeted efforts to increase canopy coverage in underserved areas and preserve significant "legacy" trees in communities facing rapid redevelopment.

- **Equitable canopy distribution:** Participants want the City to actively monitor and improve tree canopy in low-income and fast-growing areas, not just in affluent neighborhoods. They mentioned specific parts of Raleigh such as Brentwood and Starmount, described as some of the "last stands" of urban forest in the city that deserve protection. To some attendees, an equitable approach means planting new street trees where canopy is sparse and preserving existing tree cover in neighborhoods that have it, so every resident enjoys the cooling, aesthetic, and health benefits of trees nearby.

- **Preventing displacement and burdens:** Growth should not push out or disproportionately impact long-established communities. Several attendees noted that rising land values and infill development in historic African American and low-income neighborhoods could lead to residents being displaced and loss of mature trees in those areas. They urged planners to consider social equity when permitting tree removal.

- **City in a park vision:** A recurring theme was the idea that Raleigh should feel like a "city within a park," not a "concrete jungle." Participants mentioned that the city's extensive park system and street trees are a point of pride that needs to be maintained and expanded equitably.

Education and Community Empowerment

Participants identified public education about tree benefits and preservation as essential. Community empowerment through accessible outreach programs and stewardship training was recommended to increase local involvement.

- **Public awareness and knowledge:** Participants noted a general lack of knowledge among the public about tree protection rules, planting programs, and the environmental benefits of trees. Suggestions included creating easy-to-find guides on what residents can do to protect trees, publishing lists of recommended native tree species for yards (so people know what to plant), and hosting workshops on topics like identifying tree diseases or the importance of urban tree canopy. There was enthusiasm for **interactive education**, such as neighborhood tree walks, demonstration gardens, or events where arborists teach residents hands-on skills.

- **Shared responsibility:** A common theme was that **everyone has a role** in supporting Raleigh's trees – but not everyone realizes it. Participants agreed that City Council and staff should lead with strong policies and enforcement. Empowering citizens means giving them the knowledge and tools to be effective advocates and stewards.

- **Inclusive engagement strategies:** Many participants critiqued the current outreach and engagement process, noting that important meetings and volunteer events often aren't accessible to a broad audience. To **broaden community empowerment**, they proposed practical solutions: schedule tree-related workshops or plantings at varied times (including evenings or weekends) to accommodate working people; provide

childcare and even meals at events to reduce those barriers; and go out to where people are (community centers, schools, churches) rather than expecting everyone to come to City Hall.

Policy Reform and Preservation Priorities

Stronger policies were widely advocated to prioritize tree preservation over replanting. Participants suggested stricter ordinances, accountability measures, and incentives for developers to integrate significant tree preservation into development projects.

- **Stronger development regulations:** Many attendees feel that Raleigh's **Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) should be amended to better protect mature trees** during development. A popular suggestion was to **lower the threshold** so that even smaller developments must set aside a Tree Conservation Area or otherwise preserve some portion of existing canopy. Additionally, participants suggested expanding the list of protected tree species and sizes and revisiting the city's landscape requirements to emphasize native trees and avoid monocultures (since there was concern about too many of the same species being planted citywide).

- **Enforcement and accountability:** Beyond just writing stronger rules, community members want to see **better enforcement and real consequences for violating tree protections**. Several tables stressed that developers who "clear-cut" sites or only meet the bare minimum canopy requirements should face penalties.

- **Prioritizing preservation over replanting:** A mantra heard across multiple tables was that **maintaining existing mature trees should take priority**, because large, established trees simply can't be quickly replaced by planting new ones. Participants noted that while Raleigh's code often allows developers to clear a site as long as they plant young trees afterward, this approach has downsides: newly planted saplings take decades to provide the same canopy and environmental services, and sometimes they don't survive without intensive care.

- **Balancing growth with green goals:** Participants are cognizant that Raleigh is growing fast and that development will continue – the key is steering that growth in a sustainable way (a topic also covered under *Development Strategy*). In terms of policy, this translated to discussions about **carrots and sticks**. While many favored tougher regulations (the "sticks"), some also suggested offering **incentives** (the "carrots") to encourage compliance and innovation.

Development Strategy and Tree Integration

Strategic development focusing on existing urbanized and underutilized areas was preferred. Participants endorsed vertical growth, reuse of vacant properties, and connecting green spaces to minimize tree loss during city expansion.

- **Focus growth where impacts are lower:** Many attendees agreed that **Raleigh should concentrate new development in already urbanized or otherwise less-treed areas**, as opposed to spreading into the edges of the city where forests and open lands still exist.

- **"Build up, not out":** A common refrain was the idea that **Raleigh can accommodate growth vertically rather than through continued horizontal expansion**. Participants noted that inside the I-440 Beltline, large vacant tracts are rare, so meeting housing

demand will require infill and possibly taller buildings – and they were largely okay with that if it helps save trees elsewhere.

- Participants also raised the idea of **"building higher with larger setbacks"** – meaning a high-rise that doesn't cover the whole lot, thus leaving room around it for green features.

- **Reuse and repurpose land:** In line with focusing on already-disturbed areas, many conversations brought up the idea of **redeveloping underused properties and "grey" infrastructure** to handle growth. Participants suggested the City map out areas where adding density would have minimal tree impact and perhaps incentivize developers to build there (through infrastructure support or zoning bonuses).

- **Connect and integrate green spaces:** Attendees emphasized that as development happens, it **should be designed to work with existing natural features**, not against them. A notable discussion point was the prevention of **fragmentation** of green space. Participants observed that too often, new subdivisions or commercial developments leave only small, disconnected patches of green. By sharing best practices (like buildings that were built around large oaks, or shopping centers that kept a wooded park on site), the City can promote integration of nature as a norm rather than the exception.

Innovation and Partnerships

Participants supported partnerships with non-profits, educational institutions, and businesses to expand resources for urban forestry. Inspiration from other cities' successful initiatives was emphasized.

- **Learning from other cities' successes:** Participants came prepared with research and anecdotes about urban forestry initiatives across the country and even internationally. For instance, **Trees Atlanta** was frequently mentioned. Closer to home, they cited **Charlotte and Cary** as cities with stronger tree preservation ordinances and robust planting programs, urging Raleigh to compare notes and adopt best practices to remain competitive and green.

- **Stronger partnerships and coordination:** A unanimous theme was that **partnerships – with nonprofits, businesses, schools, and regional entities – are key to growing Raleigh's canopy and caring for it long-term**. Participants noted that several nonprofits are already engaged in tree planting and education in the area. However, these groups often operate independently. Attendees suggested forming a **"Tree Coalition" or cooperative council** that brings all stakeholders to the table, including city departments, non-profit and community leaders, academic partners, even utility companies.

- **Innovative funding and programs:** Many creative suggestions surfaced for new programs or incentive structures to boost tree preservation and planting. For example, building on Raleigh's existing "Adopt-a-Tree" or "1,000 Trees" programs, participants floated the idea of offering **financial incentives to citizens to plant trees.** Another idea was to establish a **City tree nursery or expand the urban forestry division's capacity** to grow saplings that can be distributed free.

Conversation Themes	Tables
Prioritize canopy equity efforts	2, 6, 11
Strengthen tree preservation ordinances	3, 6, 7, 11, 12
Implement tree removal fees/replanting fund	2, 6, 11
Expand public education on tree preservation	1, 2, 6, 7, 12
Enhance inclusive community engagement	2, 7, 11, 12
Promote vertical growth and infill developmen	2, 6, 11, 12
Establish "Tree Coalition" partnership	2, 6, 7, 11, 12