

Dane County Office of Energy and Climate Change: Dane County tree canopy working group partners with thriving earth exchange program

Posted on Tuesday, May 24, 2022

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Today, County Executive Joe Parisi announced the Dane County Tree Canopy Working Group's partnership with the American Geophysical Union's Thriving Earth Exchange program. The Working Group is a cross-sector collective of county and municipal organizations working to maintain, protect, and expand the public and private tree canopy across the County. Within this aim, a particular focus is on ensuring equitable access to trees and their associated benefits for all residents. The Dane County Office of Energy & Climate Change is coordinating the effort.

"Trees provide so many benefits to people and environment, in addition to helping our communities be resilient," said Parisi.

The Thriving Earth Program selected the Dane County Tree Canopy Working Group to be part of the 2022 Thriving Earth Exchange Program cohort, which pairs organizations with a network of national experts who can help assist in project management and execution. The Working Group will also be paired with a Community Science Fellow who volunteers as a project manager to advance the work.

For their April 2022 cohort, the Thriving Earth program is collaborating with the University of Wisconsin's UniverCity Alliance to build sustainability and resiliency-minded communities across the state. Fourteen Wisconsin communities were selected for this partnership, which matches groups with project managers and national science experts to solve local issues relating to sustainability within their

respective communities. This is the first time Thriving Earth Exchange has launched a statewide cohort.

“The Thriving Earth Exchange opportunity seemed like a good opportunity to continue to advance the county’s sustainability goals,” UCA Managing Director Gavin Luter said. “We are grateful that we have the opportunity to continue to work with Dane County.”

The Dane County Tree Canopy Working Group formed in 2021 in response to a Capital Area Regional Planning Commission analysis that showed a marked tree canopy decline across Dane County. Significant canopy cover decreases of up to 30% have been mapped between 2010 and 2017. Key threats to tree canopy include loss due to disease or insect damage (e.g., emerald ash borer), lack of maintenance, invasive species, as well as community growth and insufficient policies to replace lost trees. Given the vital role trees play, maintaining and growing the tree canopy across Dane County is a critical strategy in a climate changing world, requiring a cross-disciplinary group of organizations interested in tackling this challenge.

The Dane County Tree Canopy Working Group is partnering with Thriving Earth Exchange to identify the communities, neighborhoods, or census blocks in the county that could most benefit from increased or better managed tree canopy, based on community characteristics. The project will also help quantify the expected benefits of tree planting/maintenance to those communities. Examples include reductions in flood risk, degrees of cooling during extreme heat events, impacts on air and particulate pollution, impacts on chronic health conditions (such as asthma), wildlife/songbird habitat, expanded recreational opportunities, or cost savings that could result from tree planting or maintenance. The resulting information will be used to decide where to prioritize efforts to protect existing and plant additional trees.

The Working Group is spearheaded by the Office of Energy and Climate Change, which has set an ambitious roadmap for climate action through its Climate Action Plan. Natural infrastructure like trees can help sequester carbon, which helps achieve the objectives of the Climate Action Plan. And because trees have wide-ranging additional benefits, the Working Group includes a host of other organizations mutually interested in increasing tree canopy across the County. This includes representatives from Dane County Planning and Land and Water Resources, Capital Area Regional Planning Commission, City of Madison, UW-

Madison, Urban Tree Alliance, UW Extension, Public Health Madison and Dane County, and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.