CASE STUDY
CITY OF LONGVIEW, WA

PlanIT Geo™ developers of TreePlotter

Population	Public Trees	Tree Canopy	Tree Benefits	Subscription
40,000	14,000	20%	$1.2m/yr	TreePlotter CANOPY

"We are ready if priorities or funding shifts. This canopy data is something I can continually pull from, depending on what our needs are."

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Longview's urban forest is approaching a tipping point.

As a planned city, street trees were planted en masse during the town's construction in 1923. Today, many of those 100-year-old trees are in decline and will soon need to come down, taking with them large stretches of valuable canopy. Longview's Parks Department is taking a proactive stance toward these looming changes by tracking its trees from the bottom up AND the top down.

PlanIT Geo™ completed a street and park tree inventory in 2018 and an urban tree canopy (UTC) assessment in 2022. The inventory and UTC assessment have built a baseline of information to help Longview's Parks Department maintain sufficient resources, tactically update their comprehensive plan and urban forest management plan, and tell the story of their urban forest to city council and the public.

We spoke with Joanna Martin, Parks and Urban Forestry Manager at the City of Longview, to learn how their urban tree canopy assessment and TreePlotter™ CANOPY software are being leveraged to support the department's goals.

WHAT IS THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF LONGVIEW'S URBAN FOREST?

Unlike most cities, Longview was planned down to the last sidewalk and street name before construction even began. In the early 1900s Longview was planned into existence to provide a workforce for two new sawmills being built in the area. Construction of the city was all privately funded. Thankfully, the city's planners appreciated the value of trees and planted street-side trees throughout town. The trees were originally maintained by Long-Bell Lumber Company but were turned over to the Longview Parks and Recreation Department once it was formed.

Image credit: Joe Mabel

CAN YOU DESCRIBE YOUR ORGANIZATION'S PROGRAM AND RESPONSIBILITIES?

We have five full-time staff in the Urban Forestry Division, including three Certified Arborists who conduct tree inspections and provide maintenance. There are eleven full-time staff in Parks Maintenance who are trained and funded to assist with urban forestry work. We also get assistance from part-time and seasonal staff. We handle all tree maintenance work in-house.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE KEY CHALLENGES FOR URBAN FOREST MANAGEMENT IN LONGVIEW?

We have some overly mature trees, and we are trying to do right by where they are located. We are at this tipping point where our really big trees are going to start coming down and we want to know how that is going to impact our overall canopy. We got an urban tree canopy assessment to get a good picture of what the canopy looks like now.

The other thing we wanted to capture was where in our city NEEDS trees. How can we consider tree equity when we look across our city? The challenge there is our neighborhoods were built very differently. We have lower-income neighborhoods with a higher density of houses that have planting strips that are 3-4 ft, compared to 5-6 ft of other areas, so that requires a different type of tree. Also, our industrial and post-industrial areas were built without sidewalks, so there isn't a planting strip where the city can plant and maintain trees.

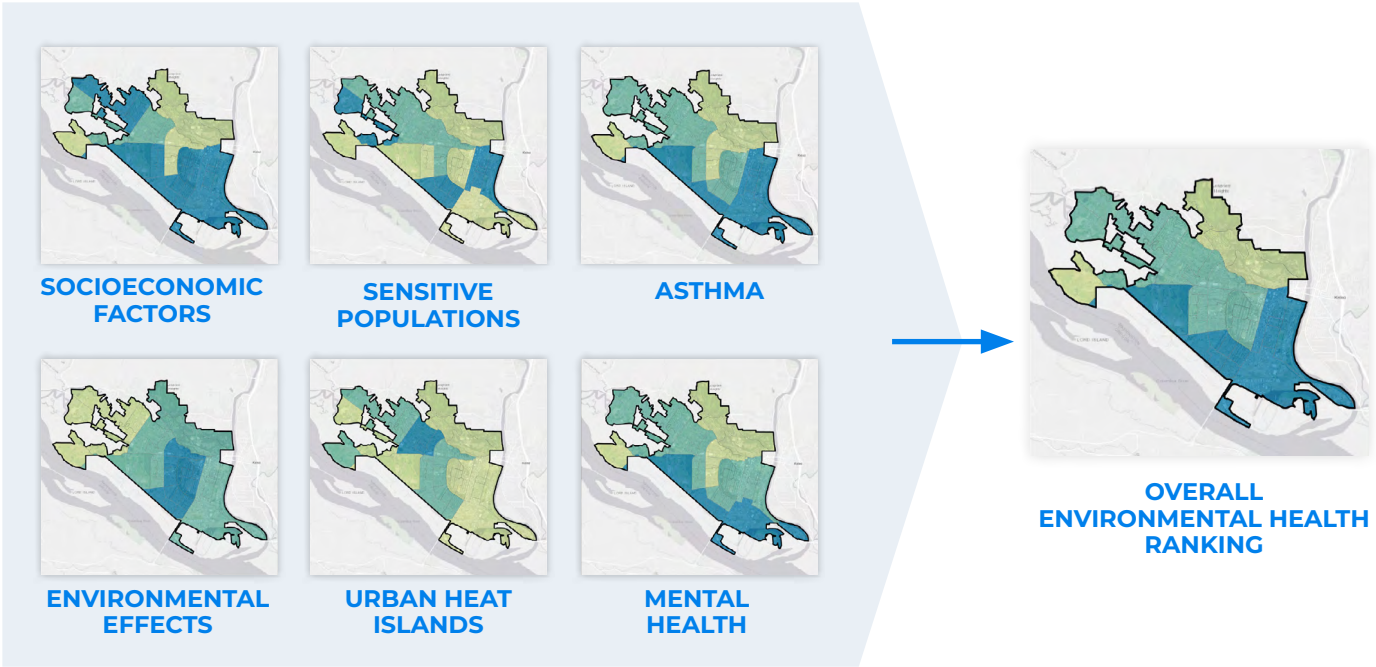
HOW DOES CANOPY DATA HELP LONGVIEW SET PLANTING PRIORITIES?

It was really appealing to see our canopy coverage on a map, and to use different layers to see planting sites on public vs private land to guide policy-making decisions. To know what is possible is really important. We wanted to see if we still have room to grow on public land, or does there need to be a shift towards a private planting focus. We found we do still have public planting space available.

We also wanted to use the UTC assessment for more than just supporting our trees, but measuring the benefits and disparities in our neighborhoods. TreePlotter CANOPY helps us prioritize which areas will benefit the most from increased tree canopy.

We requested the UTC assessment look specifically at health impacts, and how those impacts change in different areas. The assessment provided the health information we were looking for, and we've shared it with our Parks Board, which also serves as our Tree Board, and our City Council.

The UTC report ranked Longview's census tracts based on each area's need for a particular tree benefit. Rankings go from high (blue) to low (yellow) and were calculated for individual and combined criteria. The Overall Environmental Health Ranking combines 19 indicators to show cumulative environmental risk.



HOW DOES CANOPY DATA SUPPORT YOUR COMMUNICATION WITH GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP AND CITY COUNCIL?

The power of the UTC assessment will be referencing the report and data as new things come up. We weren't in a position where we needed a canopy assessment to justify something right now, but we got it so when that time comes, we have the information ready in our back pocket. We are ready if priorities or funding shifts as new members join the city council.

Canopy data is something I can continually pull from, depending on what our needs are. When I go into budget conversations, I can pull numbers to justify my budget asks. This data gives you so much power, and having it ready before you need it is SO valuable.

HOW HAS CANOPY DATA SUPPORTED COMMUNICATION WITH OTHER CITY DEPARTMENTS?

We have a relationship with public works, as there are plenty of interactions between sidewalks and other infrastructure and trees. One of the reasons we wanted to have canopy data on hand was for conversations around sidewalk damage, trip hazards, and liability. We are going to use it to help find the careful balance between risk and canopy preservation. We wanted to be sure we were ready to answer questions and provide data when these conversations come up.

HOW HAS CANOPY DATA SUPPORTED PUBLIC COMMUNICATION EFFORTS?

We did some social posts of a few of the maps and graphics we got through the report. We don't currently have a PR push planned for the data, but I have been referencing the data on individual phone calls. Not everybody loves the tree in front of their house, and we regularly get calls from folks wanting to have trees removed or if there was a removal, they don't want the city to plant a new one.

We've been able to use canopy data in these conversations to provide them with more education on the situation. While it doesn't always change their beliefs, we do get less pushback because they see there is a reason behind what we are doing. The canopy data takes a conversation with a resident from feeling very personal to a larger scope, one that includes the city's goals and how it benefits the public. It's a great way to shift a conversation.

Ultimately, we want to use canopy data to help the public understand: if we take out a 100-year-old tree and replace it with a 2-inch caliper tree, that is not a balanced equation. Tracking our urban canopy coverage helps us show we can't just do one-for-one tree substitutions. The UTC report really allows us to tell a story and then back it up with data. It strengthens our conversations by moving past the sentiment: "well, you love trees, so that's why you are saying that". We can say, "here are statistics that back up our plans, that's why we are saying it".

HOW WILL TREE CANOPY DATA SUPPORT PLAN AND CODE UPDATES?

We wanted this information ready because we have two plan updates on the way, a comprehensive plan update and an urban forest management plan (UFMP) update. Our UFMP hasn't been updated since 1990, and the canopy and inventory data will help us support established goals while also setting realistic new ones. We can say we want to increase canopy coverage, but if we didn't even know what that coverage is, we can't set accurate targets.

When we go in front of the City Council with our updated UFMP, we can show them the data, and say, "here is the baseline, should our goal be x, y, or z?" As we update our UFMP, we want to get more direction from the City Council about sidewalks and trees, and the balance of preservation and risk. Right now, every single tree is a separate conversation. I want to get us to a point where we have a system in place on how they make these decisions, with set criteria they can evaluate to decide whether to keep or remove trees.

I am looking forward to pulling in information from the UTC assessment into our comprehensive plan and UFMP. It will give us a solid baseline so in ten years we can do another assessment and see if we have been successful. If not, WHY not? What needs to be adjusted to allow for growth in the way we want it?

CONTRIBUTORS

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Want to back up your urban forestry plans with data?
Learn more about urban tree canopy assessments here.