



Denver

QUICK FACTS

WHO

Denver Parks and Recreation

STAFF

26 full-time staff members, including a city forester, an education and outreach program manager and program coordinator, arboreal inspectors, administrative assistants, an operations superintendent, operation supervisors, tree trimmers and equipment operators

CANOPY

Estimated 90,000 trees in parks and on public grounds under Denver Parks and Recreation's direct control; estimated 350,000 trees in rights of way under city control with adjacent property owners responsible for maintenance

KEY FORESTRY TASKS

Tree maintenance in parks and on public grounds; monitoring and enforcing work on trees in rights of way; monitoring and enforcing removals for safety and sanitation; permitting removal and planting of trees in rights of way; permitting removal of trees in front of setbacks of private properties during demolitions of properties; enforcement of Chapter 57 (dead, dangerous, infected trees, licensing, etc.) of the city code

PARTNERS

Almost all city departments and agencies, such as Public Works, Environmental Health, Development Services, Mayor's Office, Denver Public Schools, Facility Maintenance, Arts and Venues, Denver Housing, Denver Zoo, Denver Botanic Gardens; The Park People; Colorado State Forest Service; Colorado State University/Extension; U.S. Forest Service; and International Society of Arboriculture



KEY TOPICS

- Citywide Greening Initiative
- Neighborhood Improvement Projects
- Public-Private Partnership
- Public-Public Partnership
- Tree Giveaways
- Tree-care Training Program
- Urban Forest Management Plan

IT'S known as the Mile High City for a good reason — the spot that is exactly one mile (5,280 feet) above sea level is marked by a round brass cap in the western stairs of the State Capitol.¹ What isn't so widely known is that despite its proximity to the Rocky Mountains, Denver is actually very arid with less than 15 inches of precipitation per year and more than 300 days of sunshine.² As a result, Colorado's capital is not the most hospitable place for an urban forest, so having 15,000 acres of urban parks and mountain parkland is pretty impressive.³ "You can see what people have built over the last 100 years in the heart of Denver and the way they changed what is really a harsh climate. They created this green oasis of trees," says Rob Davis, Denver's city forester. But as one can imagine, maintaining an artificial creation requires time, foresight, funds and dedication.

PARK PLANNING

At the turn of the century, the Denver City Council adopted the Denver Comprehensive Plan 2000, which is a planning and development guide for all city departments and agencies that establishes a vision for Denver as a “city that is livable for its people, now and in the future.”⁴ A key recommendation of this plan was for Denver Parks and Recreation to develop a master plan for the management of its properties.



KEY POINT

Denver's Game Plan is a 50-year vision for the city's parks alongside short and long-term policy, management and community actions to implement the vision.

In order to develop this plan, Denver Parks and Recreation spent 16 months engaging the public on ideas through public forums, surveys and focus groups. All of this feedback was used to help influence the Denver Parks and Recreation Game Plan, which was released in 2003. The Game Plan unveils a 50-year vision for Denver's parks alongside short- and long-term policy, management and community actions to implement the vision. The Game Plan revolves around 10 goals:

- More parks and recreation for all, citywide;
- Greener neighborhoods with lots of new shade trees ...
- ... while using less water ...
- ... and conserving other natural resources;
- Improved access to parkland;

- Predict and prepare for recreation activities of the future;
- Bring a “taste of nature” close to home;
- Protect Denver's historic parks, parkways and structures;
- Revitalize the mountain parks; and
- Change the way Denver Parks and Recreation works, focusing on sound economics and creative partnerships.⁵

A layer deeper into the plan are the performance goals, which define how exactly these broader goals will be accomplished. For instance, the Game Plan outlines that at least one-half acre of public open space must be within one-half mile of every resident's home. And, there's the canopy goal of 15–18 percent for residential areas and 10 percent for commercial areas — numbers that are reflective of Denver's challenging climate.⁶

Denver's City Park



"Our ultimate goal is to preserve and enhance the legacy of Denver's urban forest," says Rob Davis. "Then, there's the long-term goal of trying to raise our canopy cover for all of the environmental benefits doing so would provide."

Three years after these performance goals and measures were laid out in the Game Plan, the department's canopy goal would gain new attention and scrutiny. During then-Mayor John Hickenlooper's 2006 State of the City address, he announced a goal of planting one million new trees in the city by 2025 as part of his larger Greenprint Denver initiative, which addresses sustainability issues like greenhouse gas emissions, waste, renewable energy, green-building practices and more.⁷ This announcement gave birth to The Mile High Million regional tree planting initiative.

The initiative — led by the city and county of Denver, Parks and Recreation, Greenprint Denver and Suncor Energy — is designed to engage residents, communities, neighborhood organizations, schools, nonprofits and business in supporting tree planting efforts in order to increase the city's tree canopy and tree count.

"Trees provide a long-term benefit," says Sara Davis, The Mile High Million program manager. "We don't get the return on investment immediately. The work we're doing to meet those goals is going to take a while."

Helping the city with these goals is its long-time, nonprofit partner The Park People.

15-18%

canopy goal for
Denver's residential
neighborhoods

SUPPORTING DENVER'S PARKS AND TREES

"We were founded [in 1969] by a bunch of park enthusiasts who saw that the Denver Parks and Recreation Department didn't have enough funding to really support the park system," says Kim Yuan-Farrell, program manager for The Park People. "These citizens started raising private funds for park-enhancement projects. A big part of our work is through capital projects, where we raise private funds and infuse them into the park system."

These projects range from restoration of historic sites, like the Washington Park Boathouse, to park pavilions, field houses and other recreation facilities, such as the group's \$4.7 million renovation — a collaboration with the Gates Family Foundation and the city and county of Denver — of the city's Gates Tennis Center.⁸ The Park People's work extends beyond capital-improvement projects, though, as the organization has a series of programs designed to enhance the city's urban forest.

The most well-known Park People program in the city is Denver Digs Trees. This program began more than 20 years ago out of the garages of some environmentally conscious citizens. "The founders of Denver Digs Trees were tree lovers, but they were also community organizers who really saw trees as a tool or resource for improving neighborhoods in the endless ways that trees provide benefits to a community," says Yuan-Farrell.

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SARA DAVIS
Program Manager
City of Denver Parks and
Recreation Forestry Division



PROVIDED BY THE PARK PEOPLE, DENVER, COLORADO

Denver City Forester Rob Davis teaches Community Forester volunteers about pruning cuts.

"Lower-income areas have more barriers to obtaining trees, so we try to lower those barriers to bridge the canopy equity gap."

KIM YUAN-FARRELL
Program Manager
The Park People

After a few years of independent, grassroots operation, Denver Digs Trees was adopted by The Park People, which took over coordination and fundraising efforts for the program. At its core, Denver Digs Trees is a citywide, free and affordable tree distribution. Every spring, residents can sign up to plant a tree in the rights of way in front of their houses, and then in the fall, residents can sign up for a shade tree to be planted in their yards. Depending on the neighborhood where the trees are being planted, the trees are either free or \$25 for residents, with The Park People providing planting assistance and the residents committing to long-term care and maintenance for the trees.

Yuan-Farrell explains that when the program started, funding allowed all tree distributions to be free, but over the years, as funding sources shifted, the organization developed a list of lower-income target neighborhoods for tree plantings. "These lower-income areas have more barriers to obtaining trees, so we try to lower those barriers to bridge the canopy equity gap," she says. The

program employs volunteers to do door-to-door canvassing in target neighborhoods, while also engaging with neighborhood associations, to encourage participation. In 2011, for the first time, a neighborhood was removed from the list because the potential planting sites had been largely saturated through the efforts of residents and Denver Digs Trees. Currently, residents of 23 neighborhoods in Denver are eligible for free trees through the program.

Beyond targeting low-income neighborhoods, The Park People also partners with the business community to support the urban tree canopy. A few years ago, the nonprofit instituted its Mile High Tree Champions program. This program encourages Denver businesses and employers to host planting days, where The Park People provides the trees, tools and other resources, while the business sponsors and provides the labor for the planting projects. Many of these planting projects take place on parklands and natural areas and at affordable housing sites.

The partnership that The Park People has developed with Denver Parks and Recreation is a key to the success of its many programs. "For all of our urban forestry programs, Denver Parks and Recreation's Forestry Division is essential for us to do what we do," Yuan-Farrell says. Besides collaborating on planting programs like Denver Digs Trees, Denver Parks and Recreation and The Park People partner on the nonprofit's Community Forester program.

"The Community Forester program was founded in 2003 to engage residents as high-level volunteers to support our work and the work of the Denver Forestry Division in planting and maintaining the urban forest," says Yuan-Farrell.

The program is comprised of four-workshop training courses, designed to educate participants on everything from "Trees 101" to tree pruning, identification and planting. All the courses but Trees 101 and Volunteer Leadership & Management include a field component to the session. The Park People handles the logistics of the program, while the city of Denver's Forestry Division helps with the training itself. Once someone completes the Community Forester program, he or she is qualified to lead tree planting efforts, as well as other neighborhood-greening projects.⁹ About 40–80 people per year participate in the Community Forester program. These well-trained volunteers are a nice supplement to the Forestry Division's full-time crews.



KEY POINT

Denver's Community Forester program trains volunteers in tree planting and tree care, qualifying its graduates to lead planting and other neighborhood-greening projects.

Civic Center Park





PROTECTING DENVER'S URBAN FOREST

The Forestry Division in Denver Parks and Recreation is comprised of three primary work units: operations, which is responsible for the care and maintenance of the trees within the parks system; inspections, which is responsible for monitoring right-of-way trees for public safety concerns and notifying homeowners when the trees are in violation, since the city's tree ordinance assigns responsibility for right-of-way trees to the adjacent homeowner; and education and outreach, which conducts research, promotes the benefits of the urban forest and engages with the community. Unlike operations and inspections, which are funded through the city budget, the Forestry Division's education and outreach work is mostly grant and fundraising supported.

"Education and outreach often functions like a nonprofit even though it's housed in the city system," says Sara Davis of The Mile High Million, which is part of education and outreach. Adds Rob Davis, "We've had some big opportunities with large amounts of money that carried over for a period of time. We're coming up to some interesting times now, where it's a question of if we can make that happen again. We're hopeful that people continue to recognize what trees can do."

As the main organizing entity behind The Mile High Million, the Forestry Division has pursued many unique partnerships over the years. For instance, in 2009 and 2010, the program partnered with the city's professional basketball team, the Denver Nuggets, and sponsor Swingle Lawn, Tree and Landscape Care to plant a tree for every three-point shot converted at each Denver Nuggets' home game that season.¹⁰ A similar relationship has formed with the Colorado Rockies. Connecting with the city's sports teams is a desirable outlet for Rob Davis: "It lets us interact with large pieces of our community to connect them with why our urban forest is important. Denver has a large outdoor-oriented group of people, so our urban forest message fits well."

Beyond the core functions of operations, inspections and education and outreach, the Forestry Division also works closely with many other city departments on urban forestry concerns. Two of the main departments are the Department of Public Works and the Community Planning and Development Department.

"Public Works is established as the ultimate authority over the rights of way in the city," says city forester Rob Davis. "When Public Works is doing road projects, sidewalk projects or curb and gutter work, we try to work with them to view the trees as part of the street infrastructure."

Forestry has a similar relationship with Community Planning and Development. One of the Forestry Division's inspectors reviews proposals from the Community Planning and Development Department for work that might affect public trees. "There are fees we charge for our reviews. There are mitigation penalties if developers remove trees," says Rob Davis. "There is a lot of interaction with developers to try to convince them to put in the money to include trees and landscaping in the right of way if it can improve the long-term enjoyment of that shopping or business area."

"We're poised to be successful in our urban forestry work," says Sara Davis. "We have the historic trees in place. We're starting to build the tree culture of citizens really valuing their trees and having the Community Forester program. We're starting to quantify the environmental services for the decision makers, and we're starting to get elected officials who are thinking in different ways." All of these things point to a city with the foundation in place to maintain and expand its urban forest long into the 21st century.

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Rob Davis, city forester, City of Denver Parks and Recreation Forestry Division

Kim Yuan-Farrell, program manager, The Park People

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