



# Atlanta

## QUICK FACTS

### WHO

City of Atlanta Department of Parks,  
Recreation & Cultural Affairs Office of Parks

### STAFF

20 forestry operations staff in the Arborist  
Division and Forestry Division, including  
arborists, a forestry supervisor, forestry crew  
supervisors, tree trimmers and a general  
trades worker

### KEY FORESTRY TASKS

Maintenance, removal, emergency services,  
permitting, code enforcement, reforestation,  
contractor audits, outreach and education,  
and public relations related to urban forestry

### PARTNERS

Department of Planning and Community  
Development, Department of Watershed  
Management, Department of Public Works,  
Georgia Power, Tree Conservation Commission,  
Trees Atlanta and private contractors





## KEY TOPICS

- Long-term Maintenance Plan
- Neighborhood Improvement Projects
- Public-Private Partnership
- Public-Public Partnership

**DURING** the 2000s, the Atlanta metropolitan area expanded rapidly, welcoming 100,000 new residents per year which boosted the population to more than five million.<sup>1</sup> While the resulting housing boom was good for the city's economy, it took a toll on the Georgia capital's urban forest. Atlanta has lost more than 60 percent of its tree canopy since the 1970s,<sup>2</sup> and much of that loss is due to development. If it's not development threatening the city's urban forest, it's the weather, which is why Atlanta has implemented a number of systems and protections for its urban forest.

## → KEY POINT

Atlanta's progressive tree ordinance has been effective in stemming the net loss of the city's tree canopy.

## FIGHTING THREATS

In 1977, city officials crafted an ordinance requiring developers to either replace the trees they remove or pay into a compensation fund, which is used by the city to support tree planting efforts. This ordinance was amended in 1995, 2001 and 2002 to reflect the faster pace of development over the last two decades and to broaden the protection of the city's trees.<sup>3</sup>

The current iteration of the ordinance requires that anyone wanting to remove, destroy or injure any tree on city-owned property or any tree greater than six inches in diameter on private property, including diseased or dead ones, must apply for a permit from the city arborist. Anyone who injures or removes a tree without a permit can be fined.<sup>4</sup> The ordinance does allow for the removal of trees for construction projects, such as new homes, new

buildings, streets and infrastructure, but those plans must be submitted to the Department of Planning and Community Development's Arborist Division, which handles private trees, or the Department of Parks, Recreation & Cultural Affairs, which administers public trees, for review. The tree ordinance requires that developers receive a permit and must minimize the impact on the trees on the site. When a developer does remove a tree, the company must plant a replacement tree elsewhere, pay compensation or both. Compensation fees are paid into a Tree Trust Fund, which is used for planting and maintaining trees in the city.<sup>5</sup>

The ordinance has been remarkably effective in stemming the net loss of the city's tree canopy, says Doug Voss, the city of Atlanta's director of Parks. "Our tree ordinance is very progressive," he says. "Atlanta is constantly growing and expanding, so we lose quite a few trees. However, the city of Atlanta's tree protection ordinance requires that any trees removed from public lands be replaced on a caliper to caliper basis. For trees removed from private lands, the ordinance requires the developer to either replace the caliper inches lost or pay into a recompense fund to plant additional trees within the city."

The tree protection ordinance also spawned the Tree Conservation Commission, a citizen board whose mission is to assist in the protection,

Midtown Atlanta



maintenance and regeneration of trees and other forest resources in Atlanta. The Commission, comprised of 15 participants, eight of which are appointed by the mayor and seven by the City Council, hears and decides appeals of permit decisions. Each member is required to have specialized knowledge of trees, the tree protection ordinance or the impact of construction activities on trees. The commission also oversees educational and other programs to encourage proper management of trees.<sup>6</sup>

With the ordinance helping protect Atlanta's canopy from development, the city's urban forest advocates are looking for ways to keep the canopy healthy in the midst of a multi-year drought.

"The drought is a very big problem for our trees," says Greg Levine, co-executive director and chief program officer of the nonprofit Trees Atlanta. "It's really challenging when you're planting a lot of new trees and many are showing signs of weakness. The goal is to have them do more than just survive. We want our trees to thrive, so we have to follow up with a lot of care." To help the city's trees survive the drought, Trees Atlanta has

hired crews to water the trees they've planted. "It's definitely a financial burden," he says. "But we're finding that with rainstorms breaking up before they get to the city, and with the heat island [effect], trees just don't get enough water."

Compounding this issue is that no one knows for sure how much of the city is forested. Unlike several other cities, Atlanta has not calculated what percentage of the city its tree canopy covers. The city recently conducted the first comprehensive inventory of downtown Atlanta's publicly owned trees. The analysis, which includes trees along streets, boulevards, parks and public spaces in a four-square-mile area, will provide information about the species, size, quality and condition of public trees in downtown Atlanta. The inventory will result in a report on the overall condition of the trees and recommendations on locations that have enough space for future tree planting.<sup>7</sup> Voss relates how important this research is in helping identify the location of the city's trees. "Atlanta has a pretty vibrant tree canopy, but we don't know yet how much is on public land and how much is on private," he says.

## 15

members of the Tree Conservation Commission, an appointed citizen board that hears and decides appeals of permit decisions

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**GREG LEVINE**  
Co-executive Director  
Trees Atlanta

Piedmont Park



MIKE SCHINKEL

## GROWING THE URBAN FOREST COMMUNITY

Working with the city in helping increase and maintain Atlanta’s urban forest is Trees Atlanta. Founded in 1985 by Central Atlanta Progress, the Junior League of Atlanta, Inc. and the Atlanta Parks commissioner, Trees Atlanta’s mission is to protect and beautify the urban landscape by planting and conserving the city’s trees. Since its founding, the organization has planted more than 88,000 shade trees on public and private land across the city, while also helping maintain more than 100,000 trees in city parks, rights of way, street corridors, yards and more through various contracts with the city. Some of its planting work was also done through city contracts; the group planted more than 950 large shade trees for the city during the 2008–2009 planting season.<sup>8</sup> The organization also has an urban forestry crew that maintains the 3,500 street trees located in the downtown area by watering, mulching, pruning, staking and controlling blight and disease. This allows the city to deploy its crew to cover other maintenance needs in the city.

### → KEY POINT

Atlanta’s Neighborhood Arboreta encourage community involvement in the urban forest and feature rare native trees.

Piedmont Park



One of the pillars of the organization’s efforts is NeighborWoods, which works with communities throughout the metro area to plant trees while building community. Trees Atlanta staff members work with neighborhood residents to identify areas — along streets, in parks or in yards — in need of trees.<sup>9</sup> During the October to March planting season, the organization brings volunteers together for a short class on tree planting and then they work with local families and individuals to plant the trees. In the spring and summer months, volunteers and neighbors help water and mulch the newly planted trees. Once the trees are planted, neighborhood associations are tasked with developing a plan to care for the trees, which is especially crucial in the first two years.<sup>10</sup>

The organization has found that tree planting can be a catalyst for cooperation and community building in the city’s diverse neighborhoods. “Trees Atlanta’s NeighborWoods program has played a crucial role in the revitalization of the Capitol View

neighborhood,” say Greta and Monty DeMayo of Capitol View. “Together, we’ve planted more than 300 trees in our community. The result was an increase in community pride, beautification and the improvement of the urban environment in which we live, work and play.”<sup>11</sup>

One of Trees Atlanta’s unique programs designed to bring communities together is its Neighborhood Arboreta, which were created to encourage community involvement in the urban forest. Like a traditional arboretum, each of the seven Neighborhood Arboreta exhibits rare native trees — these trees just happen to be found in a yard or sidewalk planting strip instead of a botanic garden or park. Atlanta’s Neighborhood Arboreta have engraved markers to identify the trees, but instead of following a path, each arboretum has its own walking map, and visitors use a brochure to locate and learn more about the arboretum trees within the neighborhood.<sup>12</sup>

Trees Atlanta also does outreach in schools and at community meetings and festivals and has an educational center, where it holds workshops, conferences and training sessions. An on-site demonstration area features the latest methods of growing healthy urban trees, such as using structured soils and rainwater collection mechanisms.<sup>13</sup>

Atlanta’s urban forest benefits from corporate partnerships as well. For example, the Nalley Tree Campaign was created by the Nalley Automotive dealerships in Decatur, in partnership with the city of Decatur, DeKalb County, Trees Atlanta, Park Pride and Keep DeKalb Beautiful. The goal of the campaign is

to work with area citizens to plant 10,000 trees in Decatur and Atlanta. So far, the initiative is about halfway to its goal.<sup>14</sup>

Then, there’s Mayor Kasim Reed’s Cities of Service plan titled “Forward Together,” designed to address two of the city’s biggest needs: youth development and community beautification.<sup>15</sup> Launched in March 2011, the plan’s Love Your Block initiative aims to connect volunteers with Atlanta-based organizations already working to beautify neighborhoods across the city, such as Trees Atlanta. When announcing “Forward Together,” Reed said, “I’m ready to roll up my sleeves and begin working with residents to clean up and beautify our neighborhoods as part of the Love Your Block program.”<sup>16</sup>

# 10,000

trees are being planted in Decatur and Atlanta through the help of a corporate partner.

Smith Park before (right) and after (below) its restoration as part of Park Pride’s Adopt-a-Park program



Atlanta's more than 3,000 acres of parkland are also an important component of the city's urban forest, despite the fact that Atlanta's city parkland is far less than other major cities. Helping maintain these green oases is Park Pride, a nonprofit founded in 1989 and dedicated to improving the capital's parks. Park Pride coordinates more than 20,000 hours of volunteer

work every year in Atlanta's parks.<sup>17</sup> Through the organization's Adopt-a-Park program, residents, neighborhood associations and businesses can take responsibility for improving small tracts of land (less than a quarter of an acre) for the benefit of the community.<sup>18</sup> Park Pride was also a strong advocate for legislation to fund the Atlanta BeltLine.

### → KEY POINT

The Atlanta Beltline will integrate transportation, land use, greenspace and sustainable growth to connect 45 city neighborhoods.

## TURNING BROWNFIELDS TO GREENFIELDS

A major effort is afoot in Atlanta to bring greenery to abandoned industrial sites, or brownfields. The centerpiece of that effort is the Atlanta Beltline, a project that involves building a 22-mile ring of parks, trails, public transportation, educational signs and other features along an old railroad track that rings the city. As described on the project's website, "the Atlanta BeltLine is transforming the city with a combination of rail, trail, greenspace, housing and art." The project, which will be constructed over the next 20 years, will connect 45 in-town neighborhoods and greatly expand the city's greenspace and trail network.

The goal of the Atlanta Beltline is to create an integrated approach to transportation, land use, greenspace and sustainable growth. The project will create 22 miles of pedestrian-friendly rail transit, 33 miles of multi-use trails, 1,300 acres of parks, 5,600 units of affordable housing and

1,100 acres of remediated brownfields.<sup>19</sup> Its implementation is being overseen by Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. (ABI) formed in 2006 by Invest Atlanta, the city's economic development arm, for the purpose of managing the development of the project. Partnering with ABI on the project



Eastside Trail  
before renovation



Eastside Trail  
under construction

is a diversity of organizations, including the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority and other city departments, the Georgia Department of Transportation, Trees Atlanta, the Trust for Public Land and others.<sup>20</sup>

One of the components of the project is the BeltLine Arboretum, which involves the reforestation of the 22-mile beltline corridor. The BeltLine Arboretum will create “an elaborately curated, city-scale mix of existing and cultivated tree species that is at once an urban forest, an ecological connector, a corridor for scientific research and a collection of remarkable public spaces.” Work on the project will include creek restoration, urban forest rehabilitation and brownfield reclamation. The arboretum will also feature a variety of “natural neighborhoods” that are each designed with a specific theme — such as The Gap, which will symbolize the city’s connection with railroads by featuring species used for railroad materials, wood products and wood manufacturing, or Clear Creek, which will be a refuge for birds and wildlife with water gardens

and rainwater management in place. When completed, the Atlanta BeltLine will be the world’s longest arboretum and will educate residents and visitors about the health, economic and ecological benefits of urban trees.<sup>21</sup>

Trees Atlanta’s Levine relates how the Atlanta BeltLine is an important tool in defragmenting the city’s urban forest. “Fragmentation allows for invasive species to take over and degrade the health of our remaining urban forests. This destroys wildlife habitat and reduces the quality of our water and air. The Atlanta BeltLine Arboretum is an opportunity to reconnect the forest,” he says.

Overall, Atlanta is making good progress in expanding and improving its urban forest through its strong ordinance and programs like NeighborWoods, organizations like Trees Atlanta and Park Pride and its many arboreta, but “it’s an ongoing process,” says Parks Director Voss. “I think we have a pretty healthy tree canopy, and we need to just keep it going.”

**“It’s an ongoing process. I think we have a pretty healthy tree canopy, and we need to just keep it going.”**

**DOUG VOSS**

Director  
City of Atlanta Department  
of Parks, Recreation  
& Cultural Affairs

**SPECIAL THANKS TO:**

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Trees Atlanta

Doug Voss, director, City  
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of Parks, Recreation &  
Cultural Affairs

Atlanta BeltLine’s Eastside Trail  
dedication after renovation



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