



Strategic Plan for the Sustainable Urban Forests Coalition

Detailed Version

Background

In 2015, the Sustainable Urban Forest Coalition (SUFC) initiated its strategic planning process to:

- Build on its core strengths,
- Guide its development and focus over the next several years, and
- Set a direction for more diversified funding to achieve greater fiscal sustainability.

Founded in 2004, SUFC is currently comprised of 31 national organizations advancing a unified urban forest agenda.ⁱ SUFC members work together to integrate trees as a vital component of sustainable green infrastructure for every community.

Over its ten-year history, SUFC has largely accomplished its initial vision of:

- Fostering collaboration, networking, and partnerships among urban forest stakeholders, and
- Serving as the US Forest Service's (USFS) centralized point of contact to the larger urban and community forestry community and beyond.

During this period, SUFC has become widely known among the urban forestry community as an effective convener for networking and communication within the urban forestry community. Further, SUFC has developed strengths in a number of other areas: serving as a clearinghouse of information on urban forestry, providing expertise on urban forestry and impact of forests on urban society, working with other sectors (e.g., water or planning) to promote sustainable urban environments, advocating for urban forestry issues, and influencing policy and the urban forest research agenda on a national level.

SUFC's reputation is strong among the forestry-related and nationally-oriented organizations, but as the Coalition members consider the future, they understand that SUFC has limited name recognition.

These conclusions were reached through a set of individual interviews with numerous coalition leaders, and affirmed by the entire Steering Committee and Strategic Planning Ad Hoc Committee at the July 2015 strategic planning meeting.ⁱⁱ Having realized its initial vision, SUFC set the stage for charting its path for the next several years. At this meeting, the members identified several key principles to guide the Coalition's future development.

Members reaffirmed that SUFC will:

1. Be **the** representative of urban forestry within the larger green infrastructure discussion, and at the table representing urban forests with other green infrastructure sector coalitions and initiatives (e.g., STAR Communities).
2. Stay focused, look for likely wins, and stay true to its strengths and resources.
3. Stay nimble and maintain its scale.
4. Encourage SUFC leaders to represent both their individual organizations and SUFC, recognizing the prominence of their own organizations (“wear both their organizational and SUFC hats”).

In addition, the members established four committees to develop: (1) a clear mission statement, (2) SUFC’s value proposition, and (3) a set of recommendations, actions and metrics in the areas of networking, advocacy, diversifying funding, and communications. As several committees generated similar recommendations, the presentation of recommendations was slightly modified to avoid redundancy and to separate one that did not neatly fit into the named areas.

SUFC’s Mission

We convene and mobilize a network of diverse national organizations to foster thriving communities through healthy urban and community forests.

SUFC’s Value Proposition

The Sustainable Urban Forests Coalition (SUFC) holds the common belief that thriving, vibrant communities grow from healthy natural systems. SUFC serves as a unifying and amplifying voice to speak up for policies, research, education and technologies that promote resilient urban and community forests. SUFC’s value lies in leveraging the collective breadth and depth of our members’ programs and expanding the network of urban and community forest advocates. Our members each operate unique and successful programs; they serve as the hub for grassroots networks that reach down into communities nationwide. SUFC provides a unified, science-based voice on key urban forestry issues – the catalyst for success now and in the future. SUFC members and partners join or support SUFC for the unique relationship building and collaborative opportunities it creates.

Future Direction

The strategic plan sets forward five major areas for SUFC’s development: (1) **leveraging networking**, (2) **advocacy**, (3) the concept of an **urban forestry science delivery framework**, (4) diversifying coalition funding, and 5) communications. For each area, the plan briefly provides some context and the 13 specific recommendations, which are numbered and bolded. The associated actions and measures of success are outlined in a supplemental section along with the footnotes and specific strategic planning ad hoc committee reports.

Leveraging the Network

In looking to its future, SUFC seeks to leverage its rich diversity of member organizations, senior executives, and the coalition's convening role to generate greater collaboration among members, build the SUFC brand, and promote the benefits of urban and community forestry. Specifically, it wants to (1) promote the expertise, thought leadership, information, and initiatives of its members, and (2) foster collaborative opportunities (both within SUFC and with "outlying organizations") around specific topics (e.g., the contributions of trees to public health)). To maintain its nimble approach, SUFC would foster these opportunities among members where mutual interests and assets come together.

1. SUFC will create the support structures to facilitate pro-active networking and collaboration on common topics by interested SUFC members ("fostering *beehive conversations*.")

- This networking around specific topics by interested members falls into four inter-related areas of (1) attracting fundingⁱⁱⁱ, (2) developing programs^{iv}, (3) providing education, and (4) endorsing each other's (and SUFC's) initiatives.
- Further, SUFC will identify a specific topic and support a pilot. The support for this pilot might include an initial facilitated brainstorming launch at the annual meeting, facilitated conference calls throughout the year, coordination of relevant logistics, developing the appropriate technology infrastructure, while cajoling and handholding the pilot participants. SUFC will also encourage additional 'beehive' conversations while providing limited support (e.g., the annual meeting could create a forum for multiple 'beehive' conversations).

2. SUFC will facilitate collaborative efforts with and among its members for grant opportunities. In this capacity, SUFC has two roles:

- Develop the guidelines, protocols, and infrastructure to facilitate collaborate efforts among its members.
- Participate directly or indirectly (through member organizations) as a grant applicant when the potential funding will either support SUFC's operations or advocacy efforts.

Advocacy

SUFC recognizes that its advocacy activities needs to be more focused, pro-active, and attuned to members' agendas, and hence, guided by the following:

- All policy priorities must spell out a clear connection to urban and community forestry needs to provide more internal education of its members around its annual policy platform.
- SUFC's policy priorities must extend beyond annual appropriations.

- SUFC needs to work with existing Congressional delegations and federal agencies to highlight the role and importance of urban forestry within the broader green infrastructure and thriving communities discussion.

3. SUFC will reach out and educate its members to:

- Demonstrate how advocacy applies to urban and community forestry principles;
- Clarify and justify the amount of funding (if any) that is expected to go to urban and community forestry; and
- Ensure that SUFC members understand and support the reason for endorsing specific legislation or appropriations.

When educating members about specific legislation and appropriations, SUFC will conduct webinars and conference calls with the broader coalition (i.e., members and partners), including the leadership of our members, not simply their policy teams. This will ensure organizational acceptance of SUFC's agenda and stronger integration of the related work among leaders of SUFC members (TNC to NASF) AND activate community grassroot groups (via ACTrees to TCIA). SUFC will set this expectation for its members and provide the support to the Policy Working Group.

4. The SUFC Policy Working Group will develop its advocacy platform and annual priorities via a transparent and consensus-driven process that reflects members' priorities as they align with urban and community forestry interests.

- The advocacy platform should address legislation, appropriations, national initiatives/opportunities, and federal agencies' policies and priorities.
- Further, SUFC will align with other national coalitions which overlap with aspects of the advocacy platform (e.g., healthy communities) to strengthen its voice.^v

5. SUFC will engage Congressional delegations in a strategic and ongoing manner to advance the SUFC policy platform, including:

- Developing a Congressional strategy that leverages Coalition members' strengths, connections, and locations.
- Coalition members and Steering Committee members taking an active role in visiting the Hill throughout the year, advocating for the SUFC platform.
- Utilizing their members to target key Congressional delegations in their home state as well as in DC.
- Developing timely and appropriate tools (talking points, policy papers etc.) and access to the tools (keeping website current) to support SUFC member advocacy efforts and for Congressional staff.

6. SUFC will develop productive relationships with multiple federal agencies in addition to the USDA and the Forest Service (e.g., EPA, DOI, HUD) to integrate urban forests into the agencies' agendas (e.g., promoting healthy communities).

- This agency strategy should be an explicit aspect of the SUFC's advocacy platform with the Policy Working Group taking the lead in structuring the process and involving appropriate SUFC members.

Urban Forestry Science Delivery Framework (*under revision by SUFC members*)

There is the critical need of research data and information on both ecological and social science, as well as the conditions and trends in urban and community forests. Consequently, SUFC has made research an advocacy priority for years. Capturing the benefits of and threats to urban forestry must be done in manner that: (1) resonates with different audiences, (2) demonstrates UF's applicability to different topics (e.g., public health, social justice), and (3) has a call to action. SUFC recognizes the critical challenge of bringing more coherence and attention to the urban forest discussion, as well as the need for a conceptual framework that:

- Demonstrates in a compelling fashion how and why urban forests are part of the solution on a multitude of topics;
- Captures the attention and investment of multiple stakeholders (e.g., federal agencies, private sector companies and foundations) by showing them how their interests are aligned;
- Assist the Forest Service in addressing the practical benefits of integrating urban forests issues across the agency as a whole;
- Highlights practical on-the-ground tools and information, as well as civic engagement;
- Builds on SUFC's Research and Development Platform; and
- spans federal agencies in a coordinated fashion.

Getting such a framework in place is a bold and unifying goal for SUFC, one that could provide multiple benefits for its members and partners. Not only is this recommendation galvanizing, measurable, and tangible, it fills a gap not currently addressed by any other agency or organization. SUFC will help identify the applied, collaborative, and adaptive science practices and science delivery that can be implemented at the local level, and in turn stimulate new research, tools, and innovative practices.

- One model would be to build on the urban field station network, where U&CF science and technical know-how gets translated into local action and civic engagement, and in turn, informs further research, innovation and information-sharing.

7. SUFC will develop the *concept* of a national science delivery framework for urban and community forestry through the Urban Research Working Group.

- The Urban Research Working Group (URWG), in coordination with the Policy Working Group, should take the lead in developing and championing the *concept* of this framework. The

committee is not recommending that SUFC develop the framework; rather once the concept is endorsed by the Steering Committee, SUFC will stimulate the framework's development.^{vi}

- Such a framework would address the chronic challenges of: (1) having a comprehensive understanding of all urban forestry research efforts by the federal agencies, primarily the Forest Service, (2) clarifying the financial resources invested in those research efforts, and (3) learning how to advocate for research, information and tools that meet the needs of our members and local communities. This framework might include:
 - *Coordinated (or at least complementary) federal policy guidance and dollars* to stimulate the development and delivery of U&CF scientific research, tools, and technologies for local communities, which would adapt them for local conditions.
 - *Involvement of multiple federal agencies* (e.g., USDA – USFS' U&CF, EPA - stormwater runoff abatement, HUD – livability & reduced stress, DOI – park restoration and livability), potentially under the leadership of US Forest Service. Further, it may be modeled on such initiatives as Urban Waters Federal Partnership, GI Collaborative, or Partnership for Sustainable Communities (DOT, HUD, EPA).
 - *Involvement and investment by the private sector and non-federal entities* (e.g., tribal, local and state governments).
 - *Engagement strategies at the local level* to promote civic engagement and adapt the research, information, tools, and technology for local conditions, and sharing the lessons from projects with other communities and national audiences.
- Organizing federal policies and incentive dollars per this framework could:
 - Create more funding opportunities by attracting additional money from state and local governments;
 - Draw the attention of private foundations and generate more grant opportunities; and
 - Stimulate further market development for the urban forest companies.

Further, this approach, builds on SUFC's core competency as convener/facilitator, while building its brand and reputation as a coalition with which to affiliate. It also recognizes the grassroots element at municipal and state levels, which is vital both for implementation purposes of the overall UF agenda and as a mechanism to move our greater policy agenda.

Diversifying Coalition Funding

SUFC seeks to diversify its funding sources to support its operations and advocacy work. Specifically, it wants to reduce the Coalition's dependence on its USFS grant, which one member characterized as SUFC's "*rich uncle strategy*", and have a greater facility to use unrestricted dollars for advocacy.

SUFC does not seek to venture into programmatic areas for several reasons. First, SUFC stays true to its principle of promoting an urban and community forest agenda through its members. Second, it is not staffed or organized to run programs or implement projects. Third, it wants to avoid potential conflicts of

interest with members. Finally, it wants to encourage members to identify grant opportunities for SUFC and facilitate SUFC's relationship with foundations.

8. SUFC will create a dedicated working group focused on diversifying funding to support its operations, advocacy work, and other priorities.

- As part of its membership, this dedicated working group should: (1) have representatives from the private sector, and (2) tap the development expertise of SUFC member organizations, even requesting that development staff serve on this working group.
- Further, SUFC will focus its funding diversification efforts on private-sector partnerships/sponsorships and foundations. It should not pursue other avenues for funding at this juncture, including:
 - Funding opportunities from Federal Agencies;
 - Raising member dues; and
 - Becoming a 501(c)3.^{vii}

Notwithstanding this recommendation, SUFC will reconsider these alternatives if future opportunities make them more attractive.

9. SUFC will aggressively pursue private sector partnerships and sponsorships; they are likely to provide the best opportunity for diversifying the sources of funding in the short term.

- SUFC will not develop any hard-and-fast criteria for pursuing and accepting strategic partnerships or sponsorships. Rather, it should stay true to its consensus orientation by developing a process whereby members provide guidance.^{viii}
- Among the responsibilities of the Diversifying Funding Working Group would be to:
 - Clarifying the differences (e.g., benefits, expectations, parameters) between a 'partnership' and a 'sponsorship'; and
 - Consider different levels of partnership dues.
 - The "10%" investment rule of fundraising was suggested: An investment of resources should be approximately 10% of the desired fundraising goal (e.g., If SUFC wants to raise \$100,000, it should anticipate investing \$10,000 in the effort).

10. SUFC will better leverage its members' development capacities to build relationships with foundations and attract grants to support its operations and/or advocacy work. This effort is likely to take longer than the cultivation of private partnerships and sponsorships.

- Directly educate members' development departments (e.g., webinars) and provide talking points around SUFC's purpose, value, (including how SUFC helps its members achieve their goals), and development goals (i.e., supporting SUFC's operations and advocacy).
- Request that members' executive directors (or SUFC member representative) have their development staff identify grant opportunities appropriate for SUFC and build the supporting

mechanisms so that members' development departments can easily share potential opportunities.

Communications

SUFC recognizes the need to strengthen its communication infrastructure, including its website and level of contract support.

11. SUFC will evaluate and develop communications tools to better support the needs of the Coalition as a whole and to foster proactive networking and advocacy efforts among its members.

- SUFC will prioritize the evaluation and redevelopment of its current website so that it features information to support member networking to: (1) provide, collect and share relevant organizational capabilities and expertise, (2) share grant opportunities, presentations, and letters of support, etc., and (3) create an online workspace (via an intranet structure).
- Further, SUFC will ensure the appropriate level of operational and maintenance support for the website and content, including updates from members and partners.

12. SUFC will develop the communication strategy, processes and support, appropriately resourced, to successfully implement the initiatives outlined in strategic plan.

- To ensure coordination between the Working Groups, SUFC will establish a planning calendar whereby Working Groups will share their annual goals and needs.
- In keeping with its nimble orientation, SUFC will continue to seek opportunities to promote networking of members and the UF community. The Communications Working Group should develop strategies to facilitate these opportunities.
- On an annual basis, the SUFC Director and the Communications Working Group will prepare a plan to provide this support for Steering Committee review.

Required Resources

To accomplish this set of recommendations, SUFC will need to expand its budget to support additional staff (e.g., additional time by its director or additional part-time staff), the redevelopment of its website, and a moderately higher level of outside services, primarily in the areas of advocacy and communications, but also potentially for networking and grant preparation.

Currently, SUFC's operational budget is \$135,000 (\$125k federal) and should grow over the next several years to support the recommendations outlined in this plan. The collective assessment of the Steering Committee was \$221,000 over a two year period (this was the average of a range from \$185,000 to \$280,000).

The one-time redevelopment cost of its website should be funded separately (e.g., grants, sponsorships, member assessment).

Acknowledgements

SUFC would like to thank those who participated in developing this strategic plan, particularly the members of the Steering Committee, Strategic Planning Committee and the members of the four strategic planning ad hoc committees on Advocacy, Communications, Diversifying Funding, and Leveraging our Network. In addition, SUFC thanks Jennifer Hinrichs, its Convener/Director until 2015, Sasha Tannenbaum, its Director, and Michael Leibman of Leibman Associates, Inc. who guided this process.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ SUFC Member Organizations

- Alliance for Community Trees (ACT)
- America In Bloom (AIB)
- American Forests
- AmericanHort
- American Planning Association (APA)
- American Public Works Association (APWA)
- American Rivers
- American Society of Consulting Arborists
- American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA)
- Arbor Day Foundation (ADF)
- Bartlett Tree Foundation
- Center for Invasive Species Prevention
- Clean Air Task Force (CATF)
- International City/County Management Association (ICMA)
- International Society of Arboriculture (ISA)
- Keep America Beautiful (KAB)
- National Association of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA)
- National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD)
- National Association of State Foresters (NASF)
- National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA)
- National Wildlife Federation
- OPEI Foundation
- Professional Landcare Network
- The Davey Foundation
- The Nature Conservancy
- Society of American Foresters (SAF)
- Society of Municipal Arborists (SMA)
- Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA)
- Utility Arborist Association (UAA)
- U.S. Water Alliance
- Water Environment Federation (WEF)

ⁱⁱ SUFC used a highly participatory to develop the strategic plan that was outlined by its consultant, Leibman Associates, Inc. Briefly, it had five phases:

- a. *Initial background and data gathering.* Ten SUFC leaders were individually interviewed to learn identify the organizations key strengths, successes, challenges, context in which it operates and strategic issues. These findings framed the July 2015 meeting.

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- b. *July Strategy meeting*, At this meeting, members of SUFC’s Steering Committee and Strategic Planning Committee reviewed and affirmed the finding and identified the key strategic issues that guided the develop of the plan. They were: advocacy, communications, diversifying funding, and leveraging the network.
 - c. *Development of specific strategies, goals, and metrics*. Four ad hoc committees developed the specific set of recommendations, actions and metrics in each of strategic issues. The communication committee, which drafted the mission statement and value proposition, surveyed the entire SUFC membership at two different points to gather their input about the mission statement and value proposition.
 - d. *Development of the Strategic Plan*. Based on the work of the committees, Leibman Associates, Inc. and Jen Hinrichs drafted the strategic plan. The Steering Committee will discuss the draft and make suggestions for revisions at its December 2015 meeting.
 - e. *Adoption of the Strategic Plan*. Once the draft is revised, the Steering Committee will adopt the plan and present it to the SUFC member at the February 2016 meeting. It will guide SUFC activities over the next five years.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is partnering with American Planning Association (APA) as part of a \$2.5 million grant to explore the social and environmental benefits of green infrastructure projects in parks for underserved communities. This touches on all four inter-related networking areas identified by the committee.

^{iv} For example, APA partnering with tree organizations to reactivate the *Planning the Urban Forest Workshop* series

^v For example, two groups with which SUFC shares common interests and members with environmental justice organizations and/or coalitions that focus on underserved communities are the Forest and the Farm Bill Coalition and the Forest Climate Working Group.

^{vi} In developing the concept, the URWG might, for instance:

- f. Develop a working set of principles and some draft goals, benefits and key elements of the framework, and
- g. Encourage others (e.g., federal agencies, states, foundations, GI coalitions) to develop the framework as well as the processes, capacity and resources that would enable its implementation.

^{vii} The committee considered SUFC’s status as a coalition or a 501(c)3 again and concluded that at this juncture, the committee SUFC will not become a 501(c)3. In the past, SUFC has used one of its members as the lead organization for pursuing grant opportunities. No one on the committee was aware of any funding opportunity SUFC has sacrificed because it is not a 501(c)3. The committee recommends,

however, that SUFC continue to be aware of this potential barrier when pursuing grants with potential funders.

^{viii} The outline of the proposed process (still in need of refinement by the Diversify Funding Working Group [DFWG]) is:

- a. On an annual (or semi-annual) basis, the committee would solicit suggestions for potential partners or sponsors from SUFC members and strategic partners.
- b. The DFWG would prepare a slate of companies that would go to the Steering Committee for review and distribution to the membership.
- c. The membership would weigh in on the proposed companies, registering their level of support, and more importantly, level of objection to approaching a given company.
- d. Only companies approved by the Steering Committee would be approached.
 - If there are no conflicts, the most appropriate person (e.g., the person with the relationship with the company) would reach out; potentially in tandem with a Steering Committee member.
 - If there is a conflict, the Steering Committee would wrestle with, and investigate the issue, and then reach a consensus decision about whether or not to approach a given company.