SIERRA CLUB FLORIDA CHAPTER | Suncoast Group

MODEL TREE POLICY AND BEST PRACTICES

04-08-2026

Vision Statement: To plant, cultivate and preserve diverse native trees for increased urban forestation throughout Pinellas County by way of a model tree policy establishing standards, best practices and public-private partnerships to enhance the natural environment, sustainable development and climate resiliency.

I. Guiding Principles for Model Tree Policy:

The following are standards and best practices for greater Pinellas County, St. Petersburg, Clearwater and all municipalities therein to preserve, plant and cultivate native deciduous and evergreen trees and establish greater urban forestation throughout.

A. **Site Plan Reviews.** Establish a policy requiring all site plans be reviewed by a certified staff arborist, preserve healthy trees, ensure plans conform to the local ordinance and comprehensive plans, thereby ensuring healthy trees are preserved and the right trees are planted in the right spaces. Strongly recommend local arborist boards be established to provide oversight of standards and best practices. Best practices includes tree-based bioretention rain gardens.

B. **Cease Clearcutting Healthy Trees for New and Redevelopment**. Set a minimum standard for tree preservation on public rights of way and private land that will (1) cease the practice of clear-cutting trees on all land permitted for development and redevelopment; (2) preserve trees more than 6” diameter to the greatest extent possible. (3) Minimize the practice of granting variances on setbacks and other variances during the permit process. (4) Incentivize local tree preservation standard for owners and developers who exceed the standard with tax breaks, fast-track review and approval. (5) Include similar fast track approval for plans with tree-based bioretention rain gardens as a stormwater BMP. (6) Establish a penalty/mitigation fee for clear-cutting any size parcel. Recommend $5000 fee per 1/10-acre clear cut and credit of $1000 for preserving qualified trees > 6” diameter. Deposit mitigation fees into the local tree planting program.

C. **Urban Forestation at Public Parks and Publicly Owned Facilities**. Establish a robust native tree canopy standard of 50% for all land at publicly owned properties including parks, public schools, college campuses, libraries and all other county and municipal facilities. Tree maintenance in parks includes removal of invasive tree vines and invasive plants. Recommend more tree-based bioretention rain gardens as a best stormwater management practice on publicly owned facilities. Strongly recommend a tree canopy standard of 50% in publicly owned parking lots, factoring in the parking lot perimeter, islands and median strips. *(Standard measures existing canopy PLUS new canopy after 10 years growth.)*

D. **Tree Plantings Along Public Roads and Trails**. Establish the best practice for native tree planting projects along all transportation rights of way, median strips and public trails where utilities and infrastructure are not an obstacle.

E. **Trees Canopies for Commercial Parking Lots.** Establish a minimum native tree canopy standard of 25% for all commercial parking lots with ten or more parking spaces. Incentivize design and development of parking lot islands that integrate native tree planting with stormwater management (e.g. bioretention gardens) including tax breaks and grants to owners who exceed the minimum tree canopy standard. *(The standard to measure existing tree canopy in the area PLUS new canopy after ten years growth.)*

F. **Treescapes for Downtown Sidewalks.** Cities with downtown districts set a standard for planting native treescapes on sidewalks with public right of ways; to grow and cultivate native tree canopy and shade for people shopping and eating at restaurants. Where there's adequate space provides treescapes with bioretention gardens.

G. **Cultivate Riparian Tree Buffers.** Establish a best management practice (BMP) that improves water quality and reduces stormwater runoff in local waterways by planting and preserving native tree buffers along streams. Recommend setting a goal of (A) fifty-foot natural buffer on each side of a perennial stream; (B) twenty-five-foot natural buffer on each side of an intermittent stream; and (C) ten-foot natural buffer on each side of an ephemeral stream. Recommend this practice may include community outreach and education for volunteer tree planting projects on public property and financial incentives for private property owners who meet or exceed the standard.

H. **Cultivate Mangrove Buffers** – Establish a stormwater BMP standard for preserving and planting estuary buffers or Mangrove buffers, to the greatest extent possible, around each estuary for the purpose of improving water quality, fostering biodiversity, and increased resiliency for properties located along inner-coastal shores, along estuaries and floodplains. Recommend this practice include community outreach and education for volunteer Mangrove planting projects. Provide financial incentives for landowners to comply and set a code with penalties on landowners who don't comply.

I. **Tree Buffers Between Residential and Commercial Properties.** Set a minimum standard for site plan reviews requiring a minimum 10 ft. native tree buffer between residential and commercial properties. Recommend volunteer program that incentivizes or provides a tax break to commercial property owners who establish wider tree buffers.

J. **Save Trees During Sidewalk Construction.** Set a standard for minimizing tree removal during new sidewalk construction and sidewalk retrofits and repairs by routing sidewalks around tree trunks and critical root structures, thereby saving healthy trees,

II. **Adopt Tree Forestation Canopy Goals –** County and cities therein adopt achievable canopy goals that progressively increase aggregate tree canopy. (1) Measure accurately the existing percent tree canopy using a standard method like Geographical Information Systems (GIS) overlayed with digital aerial imaging. (2) Set progressively achievable goals in ten-year increments. (For example, if present tree canopy = 30%, then 2035 goal of 40%, 2045 goal of 50%, etc.) Examples of cities with best tree canopy goals are:

TREE CANOPY INFORMATION

CITY	CANOPY % GOAL	TARGET DATE	CANOPY CURRENT%	DATE STUDY
AUSTIN	50%	2050	46%	2025
ATLANTA	50%	2026	47%	2018
GAINESVILLE, FL	50%	2026	47%	2017
NASHVILLE	56+%	2026	54%	2026

III. **Preferred List of Native Tree Species for Tampa Bay Region** – The preference is to plant and cultivate native, dicot tree species resilient and beneficial for an urban landscape in a tropical climate (and to discourage further planting of monocot Palm). Live Oak is a preferred native upland tree for its large canopy, long life and resilient tree strength, along with Florida Maple, Sweetgum, Bald Cypress, Black Gum, Slash Pine and Long Leaf Pine. Preferred native trees in floodplains and along waterways are Bald Cypress, Black Gum, American Sycamore and Gumbo Limbo. Dominant trees in wetlands are Bald Cypress and Water Tupelo. Preferred decorative trees are Red Bud, Sweet Gum Magnolia and Southern Magnolia. For estuaries in our region, Mangroves are most preferred for attracting oyster beds in saltwater and brackish water that filter out pollutants. Mangroves are adaptable to freshwater lakes and are suitable for stormwater retention ponds.
For complete list of preferred native trees in Tampa Bay region, see City of Tampa list at https://www.tampa.gov/document/preferred-tree-list-121606 and St. Pete list at /https://cms5.revize.com/revize/stpete/Residents/Sustainability/Tree_Placement_Guide_2023_V4.pdf?t=20240110103857 0&t=202401101038570
Also refer to the list in the City of St. Petersburg document titled Tree_Placement_guide_2023_V4.pdf

IV. **Regional Example of Model Tree Ordinances/Policies -** The City of Tampa promoted and passed their progressive tree ordinance/policy by working with various stakeholders in the City and obtaining support for the new ordinance from local environmental groups, neighborhood organizations and the business community, especially the Chamber of Commerce. Support from local Chamber of Commerce is preferred, although not necessary. Information on Tampa's policy can be found at https://www.tampa.gov/construction-services/tree-information.
Other southeastern cities found to model best practices are Nashville and Atlanta.

V. Climate Resiliency: Tree Canopies As Most Cost Effective Adaptation Strategy

Pinellas County and municipalities therein are conducting Vulnerability Assessments and finding that tree planting, cultivation and preservation can be a first step in implementing a cost-effective climate change adaptation strategy.

A. Clearwater Vulnerability Assessment Report has modeled several adaptation strategies. Tree planting may be considered the first step with its low cost and ease of implementation.

1. The report is located at https://www.myclearwater.com/Sustainability-Greenprint/Clearwaters-Vulnerability-Assessment