



VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

TREES ARE THE KEY

Vibrant Cities/Vibrant Communities

Strategic Communications Overview and Framework

Overview

Vibrant Cities & Urban Forests: A National Call to Action is a landmark report for the urban forestry community. It sets forth a compelling case, clear agenda and specific road map for fully integrating urban forestry into numerous other aspects of community planning and development.

The report is the culmination of the **Vibrant Cities and Urban Forests Task Force over one year**. Convened by the U.S. Forest Service, this group of 25 individuals represented viewpoints from a range of backgrounds and disciplines. Task Force members included local and national urban forestry advocates, representatives from the forestry and forest service industries, professional foresters, environmentalists, public health specialists, sustainable development experts, state and municipal officials, academics, urban planners and others.

Their charge was direct yet incredibly complex: identify the myriad ways in which urban forests contribute to making a community “vibrant,” and articulate strategies for integrating urban forestry into policymaking and priority-setting in each region of the country and in any size community – from rural towns to large urban centers.

To achieve this goal, the Task Force looked beyond the trees themselves, and considered the connections among the factors that contribute to the vision of an ideal community. The team examined health and social services, landscape design and architecture, city infrastructure and economics, and dozens of other factors that impact daily quality of life in ways that are both obvious and subtle.

In the end, the Task Force developed a set of 12 recommendations – and recommended action steps – representing an “a la carte” approach that each community could tailor to its own particular set of needs, priorities and resources. The full report can be found at www.treesarethekey.org.

“Each of us brings a diversity of experience, expertise and perspective to this effort, and yet we all share a common vision: that green infrastructure – in particular, sustaining and expanding vibrant urban forests – is critical to the health and well-being of cities and their residents.”

*The Vibrant Cities &
Urban Forests Task Force*

The Vibrant Cities and Urban Forests Task Force Recommendations

1. Create a national education and awareness campaign.
2. Foster urban forestry and natural resources stewardship and volunteerism.
3. Create sustainable jobs in urban forestry and green infrastructure.
4. Cultivate partnerships between public and private sectors.
5. Develop new public administration models for urban ecosystems.
6. Create comprehensive, multi-jurisdictional Urban Regional Natural Resource Plans.
7. Integrate federal agencies' green infrastructure goals.
8. Establish energy efficiency programs that emphasize the use of trees.
9. Ensure equal access to urban forestry and green infrastructure resources.
10. Support collaborative urban ecosystem-focused research.
11. Encourage open access to and use of social assessment tools.
12. Establish national Vibrant Cities Standards.

Purpose of this Package

This package is intended as an “open source” toolkit for any organization seeking to create a more vibrant community in which to live, work and play. *The tools in this kit are targeted primarily toward community decision-makers, elected officials, funders, peer groups and potential ally organizations in fields such as public health, environmental justice, economic development and sustainable growth.* They can of course also be tailored by your organization to suit a variety of different audiences, including members, individual donors, volunteers and others.

This package is an outgrowth of the work of the **Vibrant Cities & Urban Forests Task Force**, and is based on subsequent research and outreach within the urban forestry community examining:

- Common factors among successful urban forestry communications campaigns.
- The broad communications needs of the urban forestry community.
- The capacity for implementing specific communications strategies.

The overarching goals of this toolkit are to:

- **Create unified language around urban forestry and urban forest advocacy.** Among the most definitive findings of the research was the fact that there is no single, simple “slogan” that will communicate the value of urban forestry. Whether geographically, biologically, financially, politically or otherwise, every community is unique, and every community has a unique set of needs for and benefits deriving from healthy urban forests. Therefore, the tools and messaging in this package are not centered on any one set of benefits or actions. Instead we built our work around the overarching theme that *urban forests are the key to making any community more vibrant*, regardless of the specific issues that community is seeking to address.
- **Empower the broadest possible range of organizations to utilize an effective set of tools.** The capacity – in terms of both human and financial resources – of different organizations varies widely within the urban forestry community. To make this work accessible to a diverse array of groups, we included materials that can either be used “off the shelf,” or completely reworked to fit into an organization’s existing suite of materials.
- **Broaden our outreach beyond our traditional allies and partners.** A key feature of **Vibrant Cities & Urban Forests: A National Call to Action** is its integrated approach to linking urban forestry with issues such as public health, environmental justice, economic



development, urban planning and many others. This package includes materials that can be used to build urban forestry alliances and partnerships with organizations and agencies working on those areas.

- **Maximize the impact of individual and collective urban forestry efforts.** Above all, this toolkit recognizes that the *work you are already doing* is in some way connected to the Task Force recommendations. The approach of this package, therefore, is to develop tools and messaging that “connect the dots” between the scores of local, regional and national initiatives underway. Doing so will help paint the full picture of the importance of urban forestry, and its connection to virtually every factor impacting Americans’ quality of life.

Communications Framework

The communications framework for this toolkit is based on interviews with Task Force members and numerous other individuals. It is also based on a review of successful local, regional and national urban forestry outreach campaigns [LINK]. The common characteristics we drew out to frame the messaging and tools developed are:

- **Create a clear “cycle of value.”** A common theme among successful urban forestry outreach campaigns that emerged from the research was a consistent and deliberate effort to ensure that each distinct piece of a program or initiative had real and measurable benefits for all other parts. One effort that stands out in this respect is the Alliance for Community Trees’ *National NeighborWoods Month*, a campaign conceived, promoted and to some extent funded at the national level, but carried out completely at the local level by partner organizations. In the “cycle of value” created by ACTrees:
 - ❖ Each participating organization **derives** value by being associated with a national program, but at the same time it also **adds** value to the national program by increasing overall participation.
 - ❖ At the national level, ACTrees **adds** value to each local event by providing organizers with a comprehensive activation toolkit. And when those toolkits are effectively used, generating volunteerism, media coverage and local goodwill, ACTrees **derives** value by being recognized as an effective coalition leader.
 - ❖ Similarly, sponsors **add** obvious value through their financial and in-kind support, but they also **derive** significant value for their brand and their market position by being associated with a well-run event. This makes *National NeighborWoods Month* much more than a traditional sponsorship arrangement, or even a corporate social responsibility program; rather, it is a true partnership between organizations leveraging one another’s strengths to achieve common goals.

The materials in this toolkit seek to copy elements of this model and allow other organizations to replicate it based on their specific program needs.

- **Provide multiple points of engagement.** Successful programs recognize that the cross-cutting issues of urban forestry provide multiple ways for individuals and organizations to get involved.

In this toolkit, we have developed talking points, PowerPoint slides and other content driving home the fact that whether one is a municipal business development officer, a



social worker, a nurse or physician, an environmental justice advocate, or a traditional “environmentalist,” there is a clear and compelling reason to get engaged with urban forestry issues.

- **Meeting people where they are, geographically and emotionally.** Depending on where one lives, healthy urban forests can mean many different things, and appeal to vastly different personal and community priorities. For example, the need for shade may be imperative on a hot summer day in Houston but might not resonate with a Midwest birder concerned about preserving habitat in a migratory flight path through an urban center.

To allow for this flexibility, the messaging and collateral in this toolkit are built around a common set of facts and studies, yet each also includes opportunities and recommendations for supplementing or replacing data with localized information.

- **Emphasizing that “Trees Are the Key.”** The Vibrant Communities communications initiative is built around the fact that urban forest advocacy extends well beyond a narrow set of benefits. The “common language” of these materials – beginning with the phrase “Trees Are The Key” is intended to reinforce this reality and extend the conversation about the intersection between urban forestry and virtually every other issue facing our communities today – from public health to environmental justice to air and water quality to community planning and beyond. The “Trees Are the Key” messaging platform provides a means of talking about the benefits of trees as they pertain to any issue. It is the overarching message that holds each element of this communications plan together:
 - ❖ The Vibrant Communities website is housed at www.treesarethekey.org.
 - ❖ Organizations can easily include current, dynamic Vibrant Communities content on their website using our widget and a treesarethekey directory.
 - ❖ The #TreesAretheKey hashtag promotes the national conversation about the benefits of trees on social media.

Please see the Vibrant Communities Communications Toolkit for more information on these resources and how your organization can use them.

‘Proof of Concept’

Prior to rolling out this toolkit, the Sustainable Urban Forests Coalition worked to activate these tools through two initiatives.

Arbor Day mini-campaign. For Arbor Day 2013, SUFC put together a package of print and social media tools for members to use to promote common language and a common hashtag, #treesarethekey. With very limited resources, this mini-campaign generated:

- Tweets by numerous urban forest organizations using the hashtag and directing followers to the campaign website. Among the prominent Tweeters was Steven W. Koehn, State Forester of Maryland.
- Vermont Gov. Peter Shumlin directly picked up the messaging in our materials for his 2013 Arbor Day Message. Read the news release here: <http://bit.ly/16PNWrb>

Baltimore Sun op-ed. Working with two local partners, we successfully pitched an op-ed to the *Baltimore Sun* regarding the importance of urban forest initiatives in that city. A new state law



protecting the forest canopy was our news hook. Read the op-ed here: <http://bsun.md/12fxGhA>.

Activation and Next Steps

Vibrant Cities & Urban Forests: A National Call to Action was a significant step in a growing movement to unlock the power of healthy urban forests to help make and keep our communities vibrant. Working with its member organizations and the U.S. Forest Service, the Sustainable Urban Forests Coalition developed a web-based communications toolkit to enable a wide array of organizations to continue the work of the Task Force at the local, state, regional and national levels. Tools developed as of June 2013 include:

- Web content.
- Social media posts.
- “Trees Are the Key” self-guided Prezi.
- Electronic brochure.
- Presentation slides.
- Issue-specific talking points.
- Sample proclamation.
- Live-read radio public service announcements (PSAs).
- Model letter to the editor.
- Sample Op-Ed.

The toolkit can be found at www.treesarethekey.org. If you have questions or comments, or would like limited technical support, please contact:

Suggested Calendar

Some of these tools will be more effective if used when trees or another related topic is already part of the national conversation. Materials like the sample proclamation, letter to the editor and Op-Ed will likely garner more traction if trees – or issues that relate to trees – are already on the minds of elected officials, news editors, and the general public. This could include:

- Late spring or early summer when discussion about rising temperatures (and therefore, energy costs) and extreme climate events is more frequent.
- Arbor Day and Earth Day.
- National NeighborWoods Month.
- In the wake of local extreme weather events or resource shortages.
- Local tree-planting or environmental initiatives.
- It is also important to remember that using the “Trees Are the Key” platform, urban forestry messaging can be incorporated into a wide array of other types of events and activities, such as health fairs and community gatherings.

We recommend using the issue-specific talking points if one of those issues is particularly important to your community. For example, if there’s increased discussion about air or water pollution, it would be an ideal time to use our Air Quality or Water Quality talking points to write an Op-Ed for a local publication on that topic. Social media posts using the hashtag #TreesAretheKey and live-read radio PSAs can also be more effective when tailored to a newsworthy topic.

Other tools can be used at any time to tout the benefits of a healthy, thriving urban forest. Our “Trees Are the Key” web widget, self-guided Prezi, electronic brochure, presentation slides and talking points can be effectively used year-round.

Measuring Success

This campaign is built to be self-activating, meaning that a set of tools has been created for SUFC members and other organizations to keep the communications moving forward. However, there are limited resources to provide technical support and some direct communications activities. In either case, it is important to establish communications outcomes and objectives, and the means by which to measure them.

We have developed the following metrics from monitoring and evaluating the success of our communications campaign for the Vibrant Communities initiative, and the strategy for monitoring our progress toward these benchmarks. Progress will be monitored throughout the year; the timeline for completion of these benchmarks is December 31, 2013.

- 33% of SUFC members include the Trees Are the Key widget on their websites to display Vibrant Communities content. *Measured by Website monitoring and member outreach.*
- 50% of SUFC members that use social media use the hashtag #TreesAretheKey at least once on their social media channels. *Measured via online tracking.*
- 25% of SUFC members disseminate a customized or Vibrant Communities branded version of the electronic brochure. *Measured via member outreach.*
- 25% of SUFC members use a customized or Vibrant Communities branded version of the presentation slides. *Measured via member outreach.*
- 25% of SUFC members use a customized or Vibrant Communities branded version of the Prezi presentation as web content or with an audience. *Measured via online monitoring and member outreach.*
- A minimum of one targeted article is written and placed based on each issue-specific talking points document. *Measured through clipping/web tracking.*
- A minimum of one Op-Ed or Letter to the Editor that includes Trees Are the Key messaging is published in each U.S. Forest Service region. *Measured through media monitoring.*
- A proclamation is signed in a minimum of one medium-sized city in each U.S. Forest Service region. *Measured through online monitoring and member outreach.*