

A large, leafy tree with sunlight filtering through the canopy, serving as the background for the text.

*City in the Forest:  
Tree Ordinance  
Changes to Protect  
Atlanta's Trees and  
Unique Urban Forest*



# Why do we have such a special urban forest?

Unlike other cities, our major growth came late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after air conditioning.

Suburban sprawl patterns skipped over forested places that are now in the City limits.





**Steep slopes** were not used for farming and were not considered buildable until now. Atlanta is a City of hills – Beecher Hills, Highlands, Collier Heights, etc.

In **older neighborhoods** homes were previously built on foundations, with no grading, and trees were saved for shade.





Older neighborhood trees indicate rich, **ungraded soils** which are healthiest for trees and best for stormwater retention.



18" deep older soil sample is found in the root zone of a 200-year old oak on East Lake Drive.





With new building trends, “tear-downs” are now the norm





and we're losing almost all trees on redeveloping lots.





When we “scrape and grade” our lots





we lose nearly all back yard and side yard trees.





Building homes with much larger footprints is **false density** because these houses hold the same number or even fewer residents.

Projects with fewer trees and larger impervious areas exponentially increase stormwater runoff.

Yet costs for infrastructure repairs and upgrades are borne by all City taxpayers.





A photograph of a residential yard with a large pile of cut branches and debris, overlaid with a semi-transparent green filter and white text. The scene shows a white house on the left, a dirt path, and a large pile of cut branches and debris in the foreground. The text is centered over the image.

**95% of Atlanta's trees and forest is on private property.**

**Nearly 80% is located in single-family-residential zoning**



## 1. Plan for trees from the beginning

- Our current ordinance (and the March PD draft) puts trees at the end of the permitting process, after a particular site plan as been approved, at a point when design changes to save trees are impractical and costly.
- The Citizen's draft creates a **Pre-application Conference**, before major investment a site plan. We combine this with the “carrot” of early posting and appeals, so builders can eliminate delays or tree save changes at the end of the permitting process.



We can't save all trees, so let's save the best trees.

## 2. Value our best trees and urban forest areas

- Today there is no protection for high value trees. Trees are valued only by size which is only used to determine the cost to cut them down.
- The PD March draft uses an unworkable formula that still does not protect high value trees.
- The Citizen's draft uses **TreeValueMatrix** and a **Forest Value Assessment** chart to help builders and plan reviewers prioritize the best trees or urban forest areas to be preserved, in cases where some trees/forest must be removed.



We use science-based criteria for valuing species, size, health condition, and ecological value, to identify trees that provide the most benefits.

It turns out that urban forest areas with the highest ecological value are also those with the highest green infrastructure value.





## 3. Balance Tree Protection and Building

- Today we are out of balance, commonly losing almost all trees on redeveloping sites. The PD March draft will not change this.
- The Citizen's Draft balances tree protection with safeguards that ensure builders the reasonable use and development of property, delineated by zoning district.
- The Citizen's Draft also includes an exemption where a homeowner can remove a lower value tree without paying recompense.



## 4. Enforcement that Works

- The current tree ordinance *encourages* illegal tree removal because current fees and fines are simply a cost-of-doing-business, and illegal cutting saves a builder time, with no significant penalties.
- Our draft **raises fees for illegal tree removal** to a deterrent level, and allows for other penalties such as criminal prosecution and professional censure.



## Win-Win at Delano Drive, Kirkwood



44" Red Oak saved and house built and quickly sold (\$600K).