RESEARCH BRIEF

SHADE LA

Tree Permitting Reform: Why Urgent Action Is Needed to Advance Shade Goals

Example of street trees that require permitting approvals. Photo courtesy of TreePeople.

The Challenge

The City of Los Angeles (the "City") is working to close the shade equity gap in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color that have disproportionately fewer trees. Yet limited urban forest resources constrain the Bureau of Street Services (StreetsLA) Urban Forestry Division (UFD) from planting trees at the scale required.

Non-City entities ("Partners"), including tree-planting nonprofits, community-based organizations, consulting designers, and developers, are essential to expanding planting capacity and securing additional funding. Yet complex tree-permitting processes slow approvals and discourage Partners from helping the City meet its shade and tree canopy goals.

The Research

ShadeLA conducted research in response to the street tree permitting concerns outlined in **City Council Motion 25-0974**. Led by Dr. Edith de Guzman of the UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation, the research team conducted interviews and a survey with representatives from City agencies, tree-planting nonprofits, community-based organizations, and landscape design firms to develop the key findings in this brief. In this context, the "street tree permitting process" refers to permits required for trees planted in the City's public right-of-way — typically in tree wells or parkway spaces between the sidewalk and the curb.

Key Findings

The City and its Partners are aligned in their mission to expand urban tree canopy, but permitting delays and inconsistencies prevent progress. Recent funding cuts and ongoing funding shortfalls affecting UFD have strained resources and shifted staff focus from new plantings toward maintaining existing trees. These barriers limit plantings and leave unspent funding for tree planting.

Key Findings (continued)

1 Permitting challenges have left trees unplanted and funds unspent.

- More than 50% of survey respondents reported leaving trees unplanted due to delays and/or restrictions in the process, while 33% said they could not spend grant, operational, or internal funds within the required funding term or fiscal year. One respondent alone reported $300k in unspent grant funds.
- Respondents reported over 200 trees unplanted at the time of the survey, though most did not quantify impacts — suggesting the true number is likely higher.

50%

of survey respondents reported leaving trees unplanted

2 Duplicative in-person site inspections create a major bottleneck in the permitting process.

- Every permit request requires detailed site information gathered during in-person "pre-inspections," first conducted by Partners and then by UFD.
- Survey respondents largely agree that site inspections help ensure that the right tree is planted in the right place. However, multiple in-person inspections duplicate efforts, repeat data collection, delay timelines, and fail to leverage the Partners' planning expertise.

"[Partners] are trained and equipped to do this and understand the species requirements. They proactively go after grants to get trees in the ground, yet have to wait around for the City to get the tree in the ground."

3 Severe staffing and funding constraints further limit permitting and planting capacity.

- UFD's ability to process permits fluctuates each year depending on the funding it receives in the City budget.
- Over the past two years, budget cuts have reduced UFD's authorized positions by 25%, forcing UFD to prioritize tree emergencies, removals, and deferred maintenance projects over new plantings.

25%

reduction in authorized UFD positions in the past two years

4 Despite broad agreement that permits are necessary, Partners view the current model as ineffective.

- Survey respondents reported high dissatisfaction with the permit process, including timing issues (85% of respondents), procedure-related issues (73%), and communication challenges (66%).

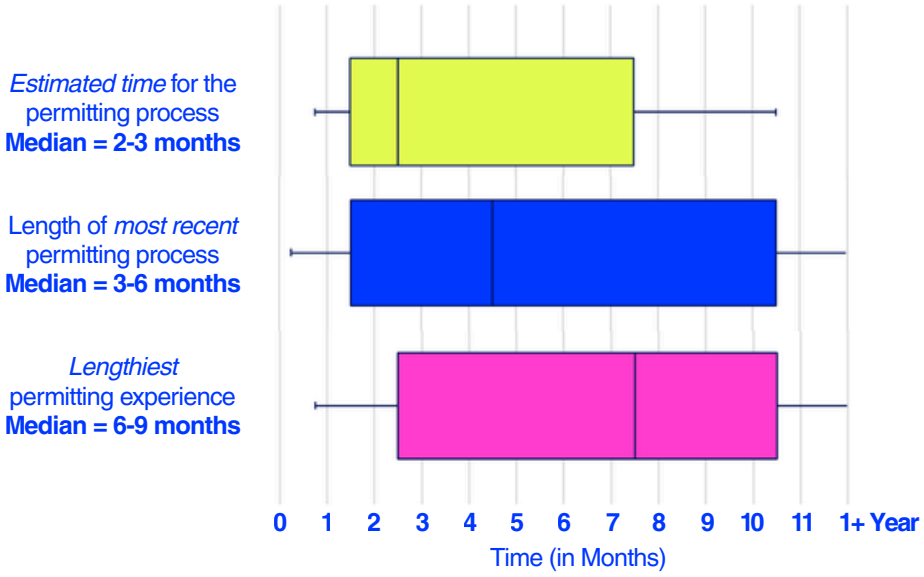
Key Findings (continued)

5 Permitting timelines are often lengthy, and procedures are applied inconsistently.

- Survey respondents expect the process to take months rather than weeks, with a median processing time of 3–6 months. Reported timelines range from under 14 days to over a year, highlighting procedural inconsistencies that create unpredictable project and reporting timelines.
- Respondents also report inconsistent enforcement of requirements, such as tree size and species limitations, which can vary depending on the UFD inspector assigned. Periodic procedural changes, including recent updates to the permit application, make it difficult for Partners to establish clear standards, further complicating the process.
- Survey respondents without strong connections to or advocates within UFD or Council Districts report longer delays and greater uncertainty.

Processing Timelines for Street Tree Permits in the City of Los Angeles

Responses from the ShadeLA Street Tree Permit Survey



Key Findings (continued)

6 Current permitting practices divert street tree planting away from areas where the City has identified its highest-priority shade needs.

- Procedural delays and inconsistencies constrain planting options and sometimes push projects from streets to parks, where a more straightforward process is overseen by the City's Department of Recreation and Parks Forestry Division. One respondent said:

> *"Rather than get trees where there is an actual need, we've had to plant them in parks in order not to lose the trees received in a grant. Not that it isn't nice to have more trees in parks, but there are literally barren blocks and spaces that need trees."*

7 Complex and costly street tree planting specifications limit the number of eligible sites.

- Spacing requirements — more stringent than those of many other California jurisdictions — reduce the number of available planting sites on streets where residents request trees (Messier et al., 2025).
- Partners may also need to install new tree wells or upgrade existing ones to meet setback requirements, increasing project costs and scope.
- Additional requirements, such as root barriers that the City will begin enforcing on new projects, offer little evidence of benefits while significantly increasing costs, sometimes doubling the cost of planting a tree (Morgenroth, 2008). As a result, 70% of survey respondents report modifying their internal processes or budget to keep projects moving.

70%

of survey respondents have modified their internal processes or budget to maintain project delivery

8 Partners are considering planting in jurisdictions outside of the City if permitting is not reformed.

> *"When it comes time to select the grant that we will be applying for, we may choose to work with other municipalities or the County of Los Angeles where there is also a huge need for planting projects."*

> *"We've had multiple partners say that if the challenges continue, they will also not pursue planting in the City of Los Angeles."*

Recommendations

1

Support funding for personnel and resources to significantly increase tree planting.

Allocate targeted funding to support tree canopy expansion, including to streamline tree-planting permitting, begin neighborhood-level canopy expansion planning, develop street tree species guidance tools, and strengthen technical advising on data-driven tree planting metrics.

2a

Enable self-permitting for qualified Partners to reduce duplicative inspections and free up UFD capacity.

- Under this model, the City would "deputize" pre-approved Partners to conduct pre-inspections and issue self-permits for eligible tree plantings that meet City standards.
- The City could determine eligibility through a formal vetting process tied to RFPs or specialized training requirements, such as certified arborist oversight, standardized site documentation protocols, liability insurance thresholds, and defined compliance benchmarks.
- The City would maintain oversight through periodic audits and inspections of a random selection of self-permitted plantings. Partners would retain self-permitting privileges only if they meet established compliance thresholds; the City could suspend or revoke these privileges if standards are not maintained.
- To address concerns about quality and consistency, the City could pilot the self-permitting program on a limited scale before broader implementation and/or develop a liability-sharing Memorandum of Understanding for pre-approved Partners.
- A local example of an innovative self-permitting model is LA County's Building Plan Certification Program, designed to expedite rebuilding after the 2025 fires.

2b

In the interim, shift to virtual pre-inspections and approvals.

Approach #1: Partners use standardized site documentation for pre-approval

- Require Partners to upload standardized site documentation — photos, measurements, proposed species, etc. — for each planting address. UFD would retain full compliance authority and final approval, while issuing faster, more informed decisions.
- UFD and select Partners are currently revisiting and piloting this pre-review model, which has shortened application times. However, the approach increases Partners' administrative workload due to detailed photo documentation requirements, including tree markings and visible measuring tools.

Approach #2: City uses expanded right-of-way inventory data

- Support the City's ongoing efforts to expand inventory data for public right-of-way assets to enable virtual pre-inspections. This approach would require training UFD staff to use the system, authorizing appropriate personnel classifications, and maintaining accurate, real-time tree inventory data.

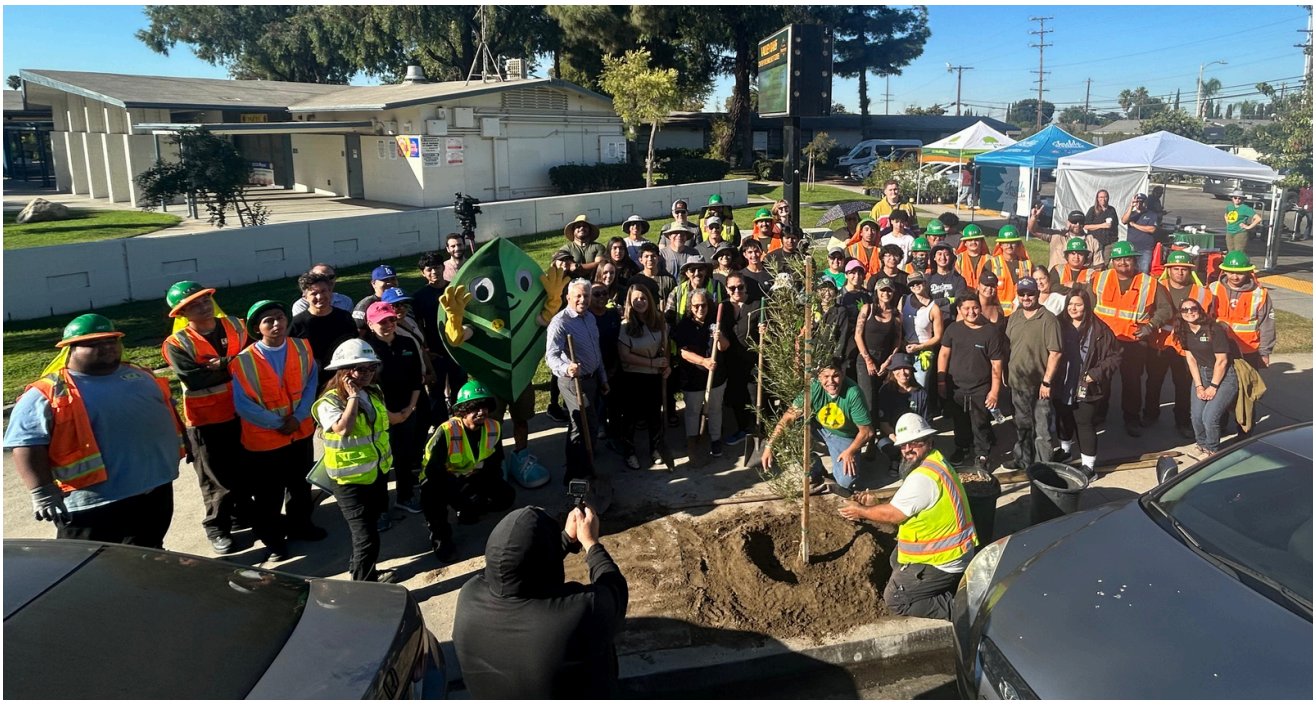
Recommendations (continued)

3 Establish dedicated liaison systems.

Both the City and its Partners have expressed interest in improving coordination. The City could formalize regular check-ins through existing Partner meetings — such as those led by City Plants — and assign designated UFD points of contact for Partners.

4 Consider structural changes to improve the oversight of street trees and tree permitting.

- Longer term, restructure UFD into at least two functional divisions — (1) tree trimming and maintenance, and (2) planting and permitting oversight — to ensure consistent staff allocation for new tree plantings, as recommended by the City's draft Urban Forestry Management Plan (UFMP).
- Alternatively, transfer UFD from StreetsLA to another Bureau within the Department of Public Works, whose mission and core responsibilities may better align with street tree planting and other urban greening programs.
- Define clear roles for nursery stock selection and tagging, inspection, and compliance monitoring, and provide funding to hire specialized personnel, such as arborists and inspectors.



City of Los Angeles and Partners planting street trees for Latino Heritage Month in 2024. Photo courtesy of City Plants.

Authors

Mia Yancich, Staff Research Associate, UC Agriculture and Natural Resources and UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation

Edith de Guzman, PhD, Water Equity and Adaptation Policy Cooperative Extension Specialist, UC Agriculture and Natural Resources and UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation

Marianna Babboni, Senior Project Manager, Dornsife Public Exchange, University of Southern California

David McQuillen Young, Student Research Assistant, Environmental Studies, Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, University of Southern California

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the City of Los Angeles and Partners for their engagement and valuable contributions. This work was supported by UC Agriculture and Natural Resources and USC Dornsife Public Exchange.

Disclaimer

Any opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the University of California, the University of Southern California, or the City of Los Angeles.

About ShadeLA

ShadeLA is a people-powered campaign to cool Los Angeles, co-organized by USC Dornsife Public Exchange and UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation, and with participation by the City of Los Angeles, County of Los Angeles Chief Sustainability Office, L.A. Metro, the Los Angeles Organizing Committee for the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games (LA28), and 20+ nonprofit, design, and other impact partners. The campaign combines policy, planning, design, and public engagement to bring shade to the places that need it most as a legacy of major sporting events like the 2026 FIFA World Cup, 2027 Super Bowl, and the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games. ShadeLA aims to reimagine our public spaces—not just for the global spotlight, but for the Angelenos who call LA home.

For more information, please visit our website **shade-la.com** or contact us at **shadela@usc.edu**.

public exchange | USC | UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation

Research Methodology

The ShadeLA research team designed, administered, and analyzed responses from a 25-question Street Tree Permitting survey sent to individuals and organizations with direct experience of the City's street tree permitting process. The team received input from the Los Angeles City Planning Office of Forest Management (OFM) and the Bureau of Street Services (StreetsLA) prior to fielding the survey from November to December 2025. The survey invited respondents to rate different aspects of the permitting process and provide open-ended descriptions of their experiences. The analysis is based on 12 complete or near-complete surveys representing nonprofit organizations, community-based groups, City departments and elected offices, and landscape architecture and engineering firms. An additional three respondents completed only the first part of the survey, and the team included their responses in the analysis for the portions they completed.

The team also held informational meetings from October to November 2025 with staff from the StreetsLA Urban Forestry Division and OFM, as well as key Partners, including the LA Conservation Corps, City Plants, and TreePeople. Survey quotes and meeting transcripts were then coded thematically via an affinity diagram to identify and assess process breakdowns, impacts on both Partners and the City, and recommendations for permitting reform. Through a bottom-up coding approach, the team could weigh responses equally and understand connections between divergent needs and perspectives.

References

1. Messier, L., et al. (2025). How street tree spacing guidelines can improve Los Angeles tree canopy (Research Brief). USC Urban Trees Initiative, Public Exchange. https://public-exchange.org/usc/project/usc-urban-trees-initiative/tree-spacing-brief/

2. Morgenroth, J. (2008). A review of root barrier research. *Arboriculture & Urban Forestry, 34*(2), 84–88. https://doi.org/10.48044/jauf.2008.011

Citation

Yancich, M., de Guzman, E., Babboni, M., McQuillen Young, D. (2026, March). Tree permitting reform: Why urgent action is needed to advance Shade goals (ShadeLA Research Brief). University of California Los Angeles and University of Southern California. https://shade-la.com/app/uploads/2026/03/ShadeLA-Tree-Permitting-Reform-Brief.pdf

Appendix – Additional Context

Key Partners:

For reference, examples of key Partners include Koreatown Youth & Community Center, Los Angeles Conservation Corps, LA Beautification Team, North East Trees, and TreePeople.

These Partners receive funding from the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, California Natural Resources Agency, and the Inflation Reduction Act, among other sources. Notably, one partner has secured more than $6.3 million in funding since 2020 to expand tree canopy coverage in the City, demonstrating the scale of impact achievable through coordinated Partner efforts.

Partner Contributions Towards Collective Impact:

Partners in the region collectively planted approximately 57–85% of the City's total yearly tree plantings from FY 20–21 to FY 22–23, according to data provided by the City. The estimated annual share of Partners' plantings appears to decline to 28% by FY 23–24. These more recent numbers may understate Partner contributions, as the City does not have complete records for all Partner plantings.