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Winchester one of five Virginia areas creating tree plan

By Eric Beidel
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Winchester — The city government in the next month will come up with a plan to increase the local tree canopy.

Implementing that plan, though, is another issue altogether.

Winchester is one of five localities in the state receiving Chesapeake Bay Program funding to study its Urban Tree Canopy.

An Urban Tree Canopy refers to the layer of leaves, branches, and stems of trees that cover the ground when viewed from above.

Currently, Winchester's UTC stands at about 28 percent.

By June 15, the city must have a draft plan written for the tree canopy assessment program, which is ultimately funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

On Monday evening, members of the city's Tree Commission and Natural Resources Advisory Board met to discuss a plan of action regarding the program.

The groups must come up with realistic goals on how much to increase the canopy by and a timeline for carrying it out.

A draft of this plan must be written by June. By September, either the Planning Commission or City Council must adopt the plan if Winchester is to position itself to receive any money in the future to start planting trees.

"The plan is the easy part," Tree Commission Chairman Patrick Farris said.

But money to plant trees in the city has dwindled since the 1990s.

The Tree Commission already has mapped out all of the areas on public land in the city where there are openings for trees.

But both the commission and the recently formed natural resources board agreed that

they should reach out to other big landholders in the city.

This includes Shenandoah University, Winchester Medical Center, and the the public school system.

City Arborist Tim Stern noted that the biggest opportunity for plantings in the city exists on private lands.

“We’re kind of limited as to where we can plant on public land,” he said.

Natural resources board member Woodward Bousquet suggested focusing on increasing the tree canopy with native plantings.

Non-native trees like Bradford pears not only cause problems for humans, but also hurt animals’ habitat.

The Tree Commission will discuss the plan for the canopy increase at its May 28 meeting, after which they hope to have a rough draft.

Winchester’s canopy could increase by as much as 30 percent, according to a recent analysis by the Virginia Tech Department of Forestry.

The Tree Commission already has the city broken up into eight geographic zones that members use to analyze and decide where to trim, plant, or remove trees.

The commission’s goal is to establish and maintain a tree canopy that is healthy citywide, not just in certain areas or around parks, Farris explained.

“But this is just a plan; there’s no money to plant any trees,” natural resources board member David Worthington said.

That may be true, but being one of only five localities with a plan in place will position Winchester for future funds to implement the plan, fellow board member Jim Lawrence noted.

“There will be more money coming down the pike,” he said.

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