In Forest Heights, tree initiatives take root

By Arelis R. Hernández July 27, 2014

There are few things Forest Heights Mayor Jacqueline E. Goodall considers to be as lovely as a tree.

Since she was elected to lead the small Prince George's County town in 2007, Goodall has made it her mission to help Forest Heights live up to its arboreal namesake, planting more than 2,000 saplings along public right-of-ways.

Her motivation is more than aesthetic. Goodall's tree-planting crusade is part of a growing awareness among officials in the county of the benefits of maintaining a healthy urban forest. That awareness is leading to marked efforts to improve the tree canopy in Prince George's.

"Trees are awesome," Goodall said recently inside her office, surrounded by large satellite images of Forest Heights' topography. "It wasn't until I learned what they can do that I understood how much value trees bring to the community."

In recent years, Prince George's has set tree-planting requirements for developers building inside the county, along with other environmental measures that are needed for site plan approval. Last week, the County Council passed a resolution that would increase the number of shade trees — trees that grow taller than 40 feet — along public roads and sidewalks frequented by pedestrians.

Council member Eric Olson (D-College Park), who co-sponsored the bill, said more shade should translate to savings. Federal researchers have found that trees help cool air temperatures in the summer and lead to lower heating costs in the winter.

"We want to make it easier and more comfortable to walk in our communities whether that is to stores, transit centers or schools," Olson said.

Environmentalists have long touted the perks of trees in urban landscapes: They reduce air and water pollution, stem stormwater runoff, beautify neighborhoods and represent a crucial part of the ecosystem, the U.S. Forest Service says.

But in recent years, the argument for more trees has become an economic, public health and environmental justice matter. Advocates say planting trees is a low-tech, cost-effective strategy for mitigating myriad problems.

C.J. Lammers, a master environmental planner for Prince George's, said the trees that cover 52 percent of the county's land provide millions of dollars in annual benefits in stormwater management.

Trees can absorb thousands of gallons of polluted rainwater that would otherwise run off parking lots, sidewalks, roofs and roads and seep into waterways that flow into the Chesapeake Bay. Trees with extensive root systems help filter out the pollutants.

"That's infrastructure we would have to build and maintain if the trees weren't there," Lammers said. "We know trees clean the air and help with stormwater, but for the first time we are putting dollar values on it."

While the county's tree cover is adequate by national standards, it is concentrated in more affluent and rural areas of the county, mostly outside the Capital Beltway, officials said. Communities such as Forest Heights — which tend to be older, poorer and mostly black — have far fewer trees.

A recent study found a correlation between a community's tree cover and the wealth of its residents.

Goodall and other tree advocates said they want to make it more equal. More trees in a neighborhood, they said, can increase property values.

"Unfortunately in minority communities, tree planting is not at the top of things that are priorities for families dealing with lots of other issues," Goodall said. Getting her citizens to support her "green" initiatives took years of effort.

She commissioned an analysis in 2010 that found the town's current tree inventory intercepted more than 1 million gallons of stormwater each year. That saved the town more than $10,000 annually in stormwater management costs, the analysis said.

Maryland passed a [law in 2012](#) requiring local governments in nine counties, including Prince George's, to levy a stormwater management fee. But Goodall was able to secure a partial rebate of the fee for Forest Heights because of the environmental measures the town had adopted.

Crape myrtles and willow oaks had been planted around the town hall parking lot. Using grants, Forest Heights purchased rain barrels, fashioned a green roof on the town hall, installed seven rain gardens around the property and laid down pervious materials.

Other Prince George's cities, including Hyattsville and Bowie, soon followed with their own studies to sustain and improve their tree canopies.

To educate her town, Goodall had to learn it all herself first. She grew up in Michigan City, Ind., about a mile from an industrial waste dump that the Environmental Protection Agency later declared a Superfund site.

She remembers playing at a creek near her home and finding frogs and turtles with mutations that, she later realized, were caused by groundwater contamination. After being elected to the Forest Heights Town Council, she reached out to nonprofit organizations, researchers and environmentalists to

teach her more about the connection between the environment and human health, and read everything she could find on the topic.

"Mayor Goodall is a natural leader," said Kelley Oklesson of the Neighborhood Design Center, a Riverdale Park-based nonprofit group that offers free design services. "She communicates for the trees and to the people, connecting them both."

(full article in Washington Post site: http://m.washingtonpost.com/local/md-politics/in-forest-heights-tree-initiatives-take-root/2014/07/27/bc8b3626-10f6-11e4-8936-26932bcfd6ed_story.html)