



Ordinances, Laws and Policies

Urban Forested Natural Area Roadmaps



Introduction

The Ordinances, Laws, and Policies roadmap aims to use government as a lever to conserve and improve urban forested natural areas. As opposed to resources regarding individual trees, this roadmap strategizes protecting whole landscapes. You can use this roadmap to build a platform to advocate for new laws, policy, and funding in your city. It is essential to note that one law or policy will not protect urban forested natural areas; instead, protection requires overlapping laws and policies.

The following are some key considerations for ordinances, laws, and policies related to urban forested natural areas. Your process may not occur in the order listed; this is a cyclical process with contextual considerations.



Urban Forested Natural Area Roadmaps

These roadmaps provide guidance for local organizations across the country to protect, restore, maintain, and increase access to millions of acres of urban forested natural areas. Informed by the experience of the [Forests in Cities Network](#), over 40 practitioners from 20 cities around the country contributed to their development.

To access the other roadmaps visit fic.naturalareasnyc.org.

Understand the Context First

Assess existing laws and policies

It is important to know where your city stands currently before evaluating potential changes in law and policy. Start by taking an inventory of the laws and policies that pertain to forested natural areas and if they are being enforced. Be sure to include laws at the municipal, county, regional, state, and federal levels to understand the full context. Some common types of laws to consider are:

- Tree ordinances: tree ordinances determine legal authority over trees. When evaluating yours include which trees and which land is covered by the ordinance. Determine if it has exceptions for invasive species or work in natural areas. Determine if fees are high enough to deter removal of trees.
- Zoning and land use restrictions: most cities have zoning maps that determine what can be built where. This determines other codes that pertain to development including trees and other plant cover. Additionally, your city may define other types of land (for example, environmental overlays) that prevent development in natural areas.
- Wetland and biodiversity protections: laws that protect wetlands and endangered species, which can exist at the local, state or federal levels, often protect natural areas in cities.
- Plans that relate to natural areas: many cities and states have plans such as urban forest plans, equity plans, sustainability plans, etc., that are relevant to natural areas, though they may not explicitly mention them. Knowing about these plans and their goals should be included in your assessment.
- Land acquisition and private restrictions: land in cities can be protected through acquisition, conservation easements, and deed restrictions. Examine the legal mechanisms that protect land from development in your city.

Identify who has jurisdiction over forested natural areas

Create an inventory of which government entities and private organizations own or manage natural areas and if they are actively managing them.

Identify gaps in law and policy

Once you have a comprehensive understanding of the laws and main players in your city, you can determine gaps in law and policy. This will allow you to determine what to push for and how to prioritize advocacy.

Passing Ordinances, Laws and Policies

Work to pass new laws and policies

The process for creating new ordinances and policies is different in each city, so you must research the process in your city. Some general tips for passing an ordinance are:

- Evaluate laws in peer cities. See the [laws and city ordinances resources](#) for examples.
- Work with community partners to build support. See the [community engagement and stewardship resources](#) for more information.
- Prioritize times in the budget cycle when leadership is receptive to passing forested natural areas laws, and take advantage of events that bring natural areas to public attention.

Work consistently to increase funding for natural areas

Determine how to provide input on the budget process in your city for both capital and expense funding. You can work with natural area managers to determine what to ask for and renew these asks each budget cycle in line with management plans.

After Passage

Make sure laws are enforced

Ensuring that the agencies responsible for natural area laws and policies allocate staff and resources for their enforcement is essential for activating laws and policies. Government agencies, nonprofits, advocates, and community residents can all play a role in accountability.



Reevaluate on a regular basis

Ordinances, laws, and policy, along with their implementation and enforcement can change frequently. Follow these steps on a regular basis to remain informed and push for modifications when needed.

Access the Other Roadmaps

- [Management Planning](#)
- [Mapping](#)
- [Assessing and Monitoring](#)
- [Community Engagement and Stewardship](#)
- [Trails and Public Access](#)