



Our Mission Statement:

Trees Atlanta is a nationally recognized nonprofit citizens' group that protects and improves Atlanta's urban forest by planting, conserving, and educating.

NOW IN ITS FOURTH DECADE, Trees Atlanta has stayed true to its original mission. Through the combined efforts of our full-time staff, our dedicated and ever growing community of volunteers, and our continuing relationships with independent contractors and corporate partners, Trees Atlanta has planted over 113,000 trees since its founding in 1985, and remains committed to maintaining and expanding the natural tree canopy of our great and growing city.

THE TIME HAS COME to take an ambitious step forward in protecting the future of Atlanta's environment. Trees Atlanta has worked hard to earn its reputation as a fiscally responsible, efficient, and effective organization. Our programs have proved to be successful, and we are financially healthy. We have the wherewithal to build our following, and expand our programs and influence, with the implementation of this plan.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE, our Board of Directors and Executive Staff have identified **four major goals** to be accomplished in the next five years as a strategic plan to further Trees Atlanta's impact as our city continues its rapid growth as a major commercial, residential, and educational center.



STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS AND CURRENT SITUATION ASSESSMENT

With Trees Atlanta's current strategic plan expiring in December 2015, the Board and staff developed a plan and timeline to create a new strategy to be adopted by the full board in early 2016. As we began the planning process to determine our strategic vision for the next five years, we felt that it was important to reach out to key stakeholder groups to understand their thoughts about the current and future efforts of Trees Atlanta. Our situation assessments include the following:

- Comparison with similar organizations
- Interview results from donor feasibility study
- Results from a volunteer survey
- Results of staff planning session



The purpose of these assessments was to inform the board's strategic planning discussions.

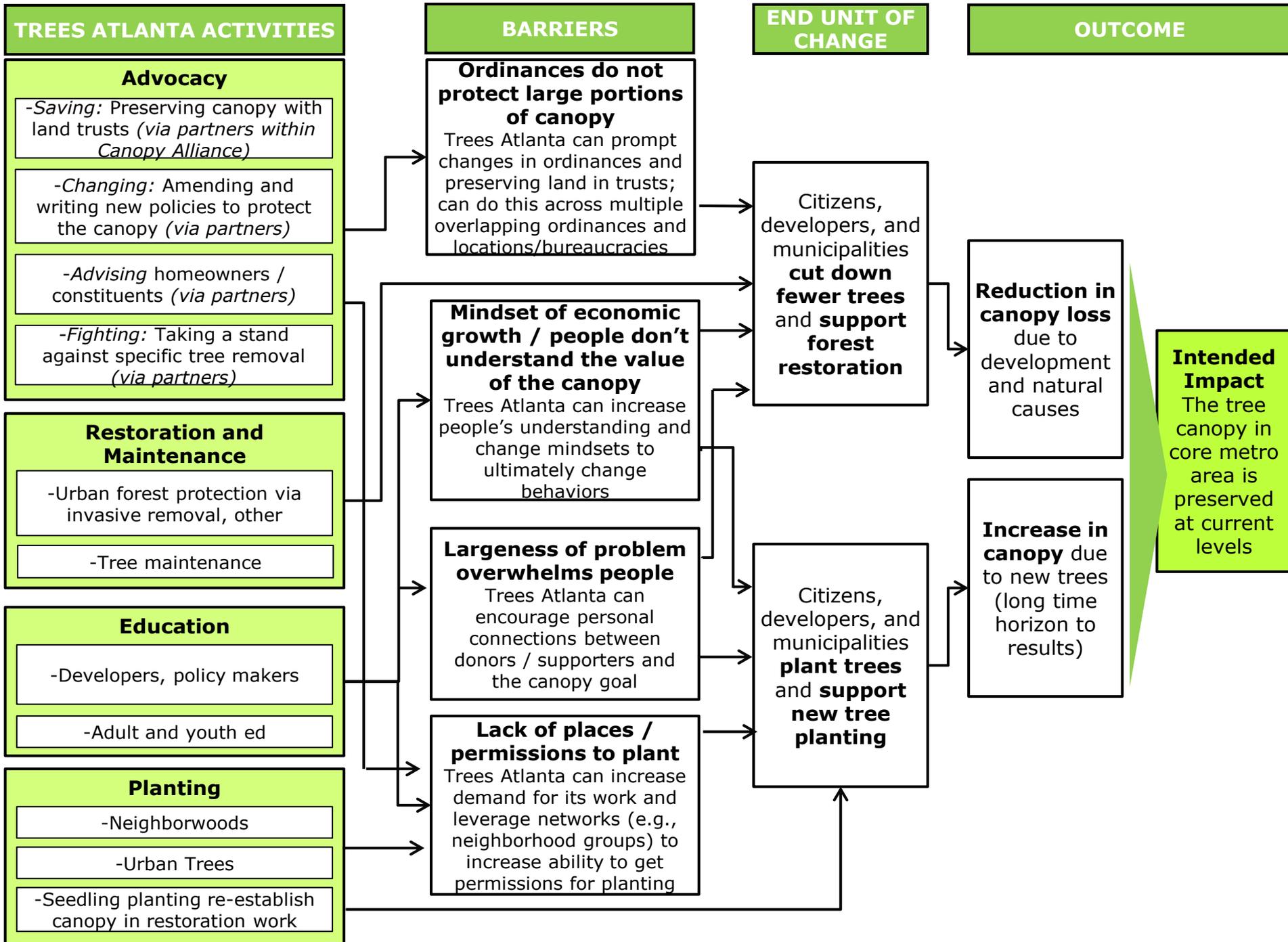
See Appendix A for details of the strategic planning process and current situation assessment results.



THEORY OF CHANGE

In 2015, Trees Atlanta's executive team began participating in *Leading for Impact*, a two-year program sponsored by major Atlanta foundations led by The Bridgespan Group, a national nonprofit consulting firm that supports mission-driven organizations and philanthropists. The program had a dual focus on leadership development and on the completion of two customized, team-led projects on priority issues.

As part of the program, our team created a Theory of Change, centered around four key activities that will help us best achieve our intended impact to preserve the tree canopy in Atlanta at its current level.



Intended Impact:

Much discussion focused on whether we were aiming high enough with our intended impact to preserve the tree canopy at its current levels. There were two main reasons that we made this decision:

- 1) metro Atlanta is experiencing a huge development boom after a period of slow development during the Great Recession
- 2) the number of locations to plant trees is decreasing. It was decided that preserving our overall canopy at its current levels is indeed aspirational and that reaching this goal will require a much larger focus on education, advocacy, and land preservation.

Outcomes:

Trees Atlanta understands that there will be continued canopy loss due to development and natural causes. However, we intend to offset these losses through increased tree planting and maintenance—by working with partners, such as the Atlanta Canopy Alliance, to preserve the canopy through land trusts, by driving new policies to protect the canopy, and by educating the public about how they can help save trees in their neighborhoods. This increased effort on education and advocacy will require us to develop new talents and programs.



ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS for 2016-2020

Each of the four goals (below) requires specific strategies, actions, and tactics. We're confident that accomplishing these goals will improve the quality of life, provide cleaner air for this and future generations, and ensure a green and beautiful Atlanta.



GOAL 1: MAINTAIN the City of Atlanta's tree canopy through 2025.

While Atlanta is defined by its robust tree canopy, it is currently under major threat by increased development happening in our city. Satellite data from 2008 shows our current canopy level at 48%. We are awaiting results from an analysis of 2014 satellite imagery.

Through several activities including increasing strategic tree planting efforts, increasing restoration efforts

in our city's forests and advocating for greater protection of our city's trees, we intend to increase our impact over the next five years. These tactics, which also support the City of Atlanta's citywide sustainability strategic plan, will allow us to maintain our canopy at its current level.

TACTICS

- Develop innovative planting and preservation plans based on 2014 data provided by Georgia Tech's Center for Geographical Information Systems (GIS).
- Expand the NeighborWoods program to significantly increase annual planting.
- Increase restoration efforts to protect 550 acres of forest by the end of 2020.
- Develop a long-term resource plan to accomplish the increased programming goals (NeighborWoods, Forest Restoration, Atlanta BeltLine, and General Maintenance).
- Develop new strategies for the advocacy program to help achieve our canopy-protection goals.
- Position Trees Atlanta as an acknowledged leader in planning for the City's future by increasing awareness of the organization's work with key players and target audiences.
- Offer a new certification program for tree-friendly development.

IMPLICATIONS

Developing stronger advocacy positions than we have in the past will require Trees Atlanta to increase our staff and to train existing staff with new skillsets. It will require us to strengthen and develop new relationships with developers, city officials and neighborhood residents to gain support for our goals. An increased effort to plant and maintain more trees will result in a need for more trucks/equipment and for more space to house this fleet.



Atlanta's Tree Canopy

Of the top ten counties in the southeastern United States losing tree canopy to development, three are located in metro Atlanta – Gwinnett, Fulton, and Cobb. Working hard toward a solution, Trees Atlanta's primary goals are to conserve existing trees, replace trees lost to development, protect greenspace areas and educate the community regarding the many benefits of trees.

In 2014, the Center for Geographic Information Systems (GCIS) at Georgia Tech completed the first urban tree canopy assessment for the City of Atlanta. This assessment is a huge asset because it provides baseline data for our city's tree canopy (currently at 48% cover) and it also helps guide decisions on planting sites and areas for conservation. Nationally, Atlanta is among the top cities as measured by tree canopy coverage; however, trends in tree removal and development signal an urgency to actively protect the canopy.

Thanks to the generosity of Google Community Grant Fund of Tides Foundation, this study data is now available to the public via an online tool built on the Google Maps platform. Trees Atlanta has created a community-based program, called "Canopy Conversations", focused on the canopy coverage data of Atlanta's neighborhoods. The user-friendly maps are used to educate more people and influence planting and conservation decisions. In addition to tree planting, Trees Atlanta works with residents to celebrate the unique trees in their communities and recommend strategies on how to work with developers and the city to protect urban trees.

GOAL 2: ENHANCE our existing partnerships and develop new relationships to enhance Trees Atlanta’s impact as an essential player in planning for the city’s future.

Since our inception, Trees Atlanta has benefitted greatly from partnerships. We consider it part of our DNA to collaborate with other like-minded groups to achieve similar goals. To this end, our strategic plan places a strong focus on continuing to partner with organizations that will help us to reach our intended impact.

TACTICS

- Maintain a mutually beneficial, long-term partnership with the Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. (ABI).
- Target and complete the goals set by the Atlanta Canopy Alliance.

Atlanta Canopy Alliance

A surge in real estate development in the city has resulted in a new threat to Atlanta’s trees. Trees Atlanta has responded to weekly calls from local citizens throughout the metro Atlanta area seeking assistance in stopping the removal of one or more trees in their neighborhoods. We provide them with information about the actions that they can take to save specific trees and forested areas, but the times seem to call for more active measures.

With new commercial and residential real estate developments being announced every day, Trees Atlanta is taking positive steps toward a more widespread and enduring protection plan. While we understand that growth is essential for our city, we want to partner with developers and the city to ensure that new development is respectful of the tree canopy and its positive effects on our city’s beauty, clean air, and water.

The Atlanta Canopy Alliance will work together to protect Atlanta’s canopy through policy advocacy, programs and practices, and by modeling constructive collaboration.

IMPLICATIONS

Trees Atlanta has devoted countless hours in partnership with Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. to create the Atlanta BeltLine Arboretum. Additionally, we have raised several million dollars to help fund the Arboretum and ensure its long-term survivability. As the Arboretum continues to expand around the 22 mile loop, a careful plan must be developed through all partners of the Atlanta BeltLine to ensure that the Arboretum is maintained for the long term.

The Atlanta Canopy Alliance, which includes Trees Atlanta, The Georgia Conservancy, The Nature Conservancy, and The Conservation Fund, was created in 2015 to protect the canopy in Georgia through joint initiatives. The Alliance must work together to understand the evolving issues that impact the tree canopy and be able to react in a timely manner to make an impact.



GOAL 3: EXPAND our adult and youth educational programming to increase awareness of the importance of the urban canopy and to promote action to protect it for future generations.

While education has always been a key part of our mission, in recent years, our board and staff have realized that education is key to developing more advocates for our urban canopy. As one of our supporters recently stated, “we can’t just plant our way out of this problem of a decreasing canopy.” Since 2012, Trees Atlanta has grown from serving 7 schools to now serving more than 40 schools in the Atlanta area.

With the opening of the Trees Atlanta TreeHouse in September 2015, we are now poised to serve thousands of more adults and children through new and innovative programs that promote taking action to protect one of our city’s most important assets- its collection of trees.



Educating Future Environmental Stewards

One way to ensure that Atlanta remains the “City in the Forest” is to educate current and future generations about the importance of urban ecology. Many local schools have had to cut back on environmental education, so Trees Atlanta is stepping up to help fill that gap.

The Trees Atlanta TreeHouse is home to a variety of new programs including summer and spring break camps, after school programming, Scouts badge programs, and home-school science classes. Additionally, Trees Atlanta is now in over 40 schools (public and private, elementary through high school) teaching environmental science in unique and interesting ways to our future stewards.

Trees Atlanta’s adult education programs provide opportunities for learners of all levels to gain new techniques and concepts while engaging the audience through their existing areas of interest. Hands-on workshops offer more in-depth instruction from local or nationally-recognized professional groups or individuals while adult education certificate programs increase learning through themed tracks designed for those interested in advancing their education more formally.

Plans also include new research projects with university partners in interdisciplinary fields related to environmental sciences, public health, and urban planting.

TACTICS

- Expand youth educational activities through Urban Tree Trackers, summer and spring break camps, Scout programs, and additional new programming.
- Expand adult educational activities through TreeKeepers, Walking Tours, and Speaker Series, as well as new programming.
- Develop an Arboretum Conference for city leaders, urban planners, landscape professionals, neighbors, and educators, and the general public, to address the environmental, cultural, and economic role of trees in an urban setting.
- Establish a Youth Tree Team program, an environmentally focused job training and professional development program for high school students.
- Develop marketing programs to generate education program participation.
- Establish a plan for a permanent education space.
- Develop university partnerships to increase research on the Atlanta BeltLine Arboretum.

IMPLICATIONS

Trees Atlanta feels strongly that environmental education is the path toward ensuring that future generations understand the importance of and are willing to work toward preserving the canopy. As we dramatically increase our efforts in this area there is a need for new and innovative programming that can support our fee-for-service growth model. Trees Atlanta will need to continue benchmarking the success of other similar organizations to more quickly develop education programming in emerging areas.

Atlanta BeltLine Arboretum

An arboretum is a botanical garden focused on woody plants which are grown for research, education, and display. The Atlanta BeltLine Arboretum, when completed, will be an unprecedented 22-mile linear arboretum – a city-scale mix of existing and cultivated tree species that is an urban forest, an ecological connector, a corridor for scientific research, and a collection of remarkable public spaces focused on education. It will help preserve and expand the City's urban forest while increasing canopy coverage and shade.

To date, Trees Atlanta has planted over 2,000 trees and 11 acres of native grasses and wildflowers within the Atlanta BeltLine Arboretum. Thousands of volunteers have worked tirelessly to help care for these plants as they mature. There are now more than 109,000 individual plants, in 43 different species of grasses and wildflowers. There are collections of trees such as oaks, magnolias, and viburnums. This Arboretum provides a much needed source of habitat, food, and protection for butterflies, bees and birds as well as brings a beautiful aesthetic to the area and creates a unique sense of place.



GOAL 4: GROW the organization, through communications and resource development, to an expanded operational budget of \$5 million per annum by 2025.

Currently, Trees Atlanta receives funding from a variety of sources including municipal and private contracts, corporations, foundations and individuals.



While these sources have provided steady funding to support our operations, we are looking at strategies to grow funding to support the expanded need for our services.

The tactics outlined provide a strong foundation that will allow Trees Atlanta to double its annually operating budget over the next 10 years.

Included as part of this goal are also tactics to increase volunteer and staff resources and board training and development to support the intended growth of our organization.

TACTICS

- Determine the “Big Idea” for revenue growth.
- Continue to increase the organization’s funding from philanthropic funding sources.
- Increase fee-for-service revenue from summer camp and education programs.
- Pursue support from federal government sources.
- Increase the number of regular volunteers and the total of volunteer hours, with an emphasis on needed expertise.
- Create a “business development” staff position to obtain new contracts with municipalities and corporations.
- Continue to recruit, retain, and assess staff, and help them develop professionally to standards of excellence.
- Maintain an active and engaged Board of Directors that governs and supports the organization.
- Achieve long-term financial sustainability.
- By 2019, determine the scope and goals of a Capital Campaign, with funds raised beginning in FY2020.
- Increase methods of measurement and evaluation for the organization.

Our Wonderful Volunteers

Trees Atlanta could not make the impact that we do without our team of dedicated volunteers, all providing a crucial role in fulfilling the mission of Trees Atlanta. Each year, more than 5,000 people give their time, energy, and knowledge to help restore, maintain, and educate others about the importance of Atlanta’s urban forest.

Trees Atlanta likes to promote that ‘we don’t just plant trees, we plant communities.’ Our volunteers not only help us plant and take care of thousands of trees each year, they also help us restore our urban forest by removing invasive plants such as English Ivy, privet and kudzu. They lead tours along the Atlanta BeltLine Arboretum to teach thousands of visitors about this 22 mile collection of trees and plants. They work in our office to help our staff do even more. They help us teach our next generation about the importance of trees and urban ecology.

Through Trees Atlanta’s Corporate Volunteer Program, employees have an opportunity to lend a hand and help make Atlanta a cleaner, greener, more inviting place to live and work. Whether planting trees along a city street or mulching and pruning in a city park, volunteers get a real sense of accomplishment and enjoy a change of pace from their ordinary workday.

Volunteers are truly the lifeblood of our organization. Without them, Trees Atlanta would not be able to protect our urban forest.



IMPLICATIONS

Trees Atlanta must determine a clear path to engage new donors and to increase fee-for-service revenue through contracts and programming while maintaining current funding. This will require a coordinated effort with staff and board members to thoroughly understand the needs of the community and opportunities for Trees Atlanta to assist in meeting those needs.

CHALLENGES

When looking ahead to goals, strategies, tactics, and plans, it's important to anticipate and articulate challenges that may lie ahead. Growth and development are exciting for a city, but they can produce threats to the natural environment. As increased areas of our city become covered with impervious surfaces, our trees and greenspaces may struggle to survive and our citizens' quality of life will suffer.

Trees Atlanta will have to respond creatively to fulfill its mission and preserve the tree canopy and urban forest. This might include working to influence local tree ordinances, partnering with developers to promote tree-friendly landscape design, and taking stands against specific tree removal.

The challenge will be to tread carefully in increasing its advocacy in these civic forums. Trees Atlanta will strive to maintain excellent relationships with elected officials and business leaders, while staying faithful and true to its mission.

