Presentation to the Forestry and Natural Resources Commission
on EcoAction Arlington's [EAA] 2026 Tree Planting Cycles (Oct. 22, 2026)

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Background: Launched in 2009 to administer the County's Tree Canopy Fund [TCF], the County Tree Planting Program has added 4651 trees to Arlington's canopy over 17 years. In 2022 and with support of generous funders, EAA introduced a companion Tree Canopy Equity Program to focus planting efforts in 13 neighborhoods with low canopy cover. As some have smaller lots, residents in equity neighborhoods may apply to receive shrubs and "small" size trees that are not generally available to other neighborhoods. To date, EAA has planted 1027 trees and shrubs in equity neighborhoods.

Recent Program Developments:

- **2026 tree and shrub planting results:**
  - Spring 2026 Cycle: 116 total items (103 trees + 13 shrubs)
  - Fall 2026 Cycle: 212 total items (173 trees + 39 shrubs)
  - The 83% total increase in from Spring to Fall (+68% trees & +200% shrubs) is likely due to additional EAA Tree Ambassador work, especially with larger MUB/HOW sites where we can plant many trees per cycle at a lower "cost of acquisition" than it takes for each tree resulting from an individual home site visit.

- **Website and Online Application Portal Enhancements:**
  - We're actively and iteratively redesigning our website and online application portal to help applicants better understand our program and efficiently file complete applications. We hope to publish an initial refresh before the upcoming application window.
  - In 2026, several applicants struggled to upload photos to our portal, so we accepted their photos by email. With the next cycle, we're moving to a new intake platform that we hope will resolve this issue.
  - We're adding functionality so applicants can request multiple trees with a single online application, without re-entering biographic information for each tree request.
  - For the spring 2027 application, we are not listing the species available with quantities. Applicants can simply provide their first and second choice of species. This should help engage applicants looking for a specific desired species.
  - To avoid losing potential applicants who visit our site outside of the two application windows, we're making our website more "evergreen," so that people can see potential species lists and submit expressions of interest any time of year. This also helps us spread out TS consultation work at a more manageable pace over more months.

- **Site plans for larger properties:**
  - In 2026, EAA Tree Ambs experimented with GPS waypoint mapping technology to create site plans of potential tree planting locations for large MUBs/HOWs. We surveyed the grounds and

used our phones' GPS tools and an app to create maps that capture locations, photos, and any notes. We shared the maps with property managers and, if they responded positively, we helped them prepare an application of an initial 10-15 priority sites that they might plant in a first cycle.
    - A key challenge is management's ability and commitment to water trees spread out across large distances. Some are reluctant to commit to more than a few trees per cycle because of watering challenges.
    - Some MUB/HOWs are motivated by the stormwater credit benefit and know about it before we raise the benefit. Some want to plant only 4 trees per year to spread out the benefit over more years. We recently mapped two churches and identified 75+ tree sites. Each church committed to planting 4 trees in this Fall 2026 cycle.
    - We also mapped an MUB along Columbia Pike and identified 60 tree planting sites. That property will receive 10 trees this Fall.
    - We mapped several other large properties, primarily in equity neighborhoods along Columbia Pike. We're waiting to see if those will turn into planting commitments.
    - In the Fall 2026 cycle, of 212 total items approved, 98 (46%) are from MUBs/HOWs.

- **Supporting County/FNRC Panel Reviews:**
    - Lesson learned: It is beneficial (1) to review applications upon receipt to early identify and resolve ambiguities (e.g., better site descriptions and measurements; better photos; inclusion of any TS consult inputs) and (2) to prepare and submit batches of applications, with refined supporting presentation materials, to the panel so they can adjudicate the batches more efficiently and early in the cycle. This allows us to communicate results earlier to applicants and settle expectations about next steps. In years past, we successfully employed this incremental batch strategy, but we fell away from this approach in recent years when applications declined. We recently discussed with Vincent and are exploring doing something similar in the future.
    - TS consult inputs: Roughly 20% of applicants request TS consultations. We are establishing better processes to ensure that review panelists can readily see when an application was supported by a TS consultation and what the TS recommended or otherwise observed about the site(s). Including TS notes will give panelists greater confidence in the suitability of the planting sites and expedite panel review work.

Setback updates:

- Vincent helped us clarify and better explain on our website the various setback requirements. This will help residents, and those of us who assist them, assess and prepare more approvable applications. Vincent also helped us introduce a few setback flexibilities to hopefully get more trees into smaller yards. Clarifications, setback changes, and lessons learned:
- **Shrubs** (in equity neighborhoods only; no exceptions):
    - Clarification that the only applicable setback is 5' from bldg and other shrubs/trees.
    - If someone applies for a shrub in a location or property that will support trees, we've learned the value of encouraging them to host trees and explain our canopy-growth goals. During our

review of applications, we went back to applicants to encourage trees (over and in addition to shrubs) and many were happy to upgrade to and/or add trees.

- **Overhead wire setback**:
    - This is a big policy gain. Over years, we've foregone many planting opportunities to overhead wire considerations, and we now have more clarity and flexibility to site trees.
    - First, instead of 20' setback for all trees, we can now site "small" trees 5' from overhead wires, which is more consistent with the county's rules for planting on county land.
    - Second, we clarified that the relevant powerline for this setback is the "distribution" (or, pole-to-pole) line running along a street or behind properties. Technically, there is no setback requirement for "service" lines, which are the "pole-to-house" lines. As Vincent explained, this distinction is because (1) Dominion Energy's tree maintenance contractor will not generally enter a yard to prune around those "service" lines, and (2) the service lines carry lower voltage than the distribution lines. That said, our website clarifies: "[R]esidents may be responsible for their maintenance [(trees near service lines)] and thus should be aware of future conflicts with those [service] wires as well."
- **Exception process to plant "small" trees on non-equity properties:**
    - Smaller yards (e.g., duplexes) might only reasonably host "small" trees, and those small yards can fall outside of an equity neighborhood. We newly permit residents to ask for an exception to plant a "small" tree in a non-equity location, if they can only reasonably site a "small" tree or for other ecologically sound reasons (e.g., erosion control along a river embankment). The goal is to prioritize small trees for those locations where a medium or large tree would not fit. We're actively working on logic in our future online application to capture such exception requests.
    - Corollary: Even in an equity neighborhood, we might recommend against approving a small tree simply based upon resident preference, if the site would accommodate a larger tree. To date, we've had success persuading most applicants to up-size tree selections, without denying an application.
- **Tree-to-tree setback:**
    - Another policy expansion to help with canopy growth. To date, we've required 20' setbacks from any other tree in the yard. Newly, Vincent permits us to site trees as close as 10' from other "small" trees. This will allow us to plant larger trees that will eventually grow "up and over" smaller ornamentals (e.g., dogwoods and crape myrtles).
- **"On-deck circle" to re-home trees:**
    - Inevitably and at the last moment, a few applicants withdraw or a planting site is deemed unsuitable (e.g., Ms. Utility marks unknown underground utilities) and we need to re-home a tree that we purchased and is "on the truck." We maintain an "on deck circle" of alternate, panel-approved planting sites for those occasions where we need to move a tree elsewhere. MUBs/HOWs with larger grounds are helpful for this purpose.

Tree species updates:

- Lists of available species have been relatively stable with each Spring and Fall cycle. We consult Vincent, Davey Trees, and TSAA for inputs before finalizing each cycle's offerings.
- Going forward and based on good counsel from Vincent and an FNRC commissioner, we will specify "straight species" for new tree and shrub orders to avoid cultivars, and we'll only order "single stem" river birches, which are easier to fit within setbacks and less prone to storm damage over time.
- We are exploring the opportunity to shift from 2" caliper to 1-1.5" caliper trees in the future. More consistent with County planting practices, this affords several benefits:
    - Lower unit costs, so we can plant more trees with available funds;
    - Smaller trees are grown in containers (up to 25 gallons), so feeder roots remain with the planted root ball and are not lost to field digging as occurs with larger ball-and-burlap (B&B) trees. This may afford faster acclimation and better survival rates;
    - Smaller trees should also require less staking support than 2" caliper trees; and
    - Davey reports that, as trees grow at the nursery, they are up-sized in larger containers over time, which helps prevent future root girdling problems.

Tagging versus inspecting at Davey's site:

- In years past, EAA and TS visited a nursery to inspect and select/tag trees. Those trees were then dug out of the field for transport as ball & burlap (B&B). With White House Natives' closure, in the spring of 2026, Davey invited EcoAction Arlington to inspect trees, selected from Still Pond Nursery, at Davey's staging location. As we explore evolving to 1" to 1 1/2" caliper container trees, this new inspection model has some benefits, including the ability to see potential root girdling issues in containers.

Tree promotion observations:

- A few personal, anecdotal observations about tree promotion work, based upon my experiences (EAA Tree Amb in equity neighborhoods; TS consultations; Ashton Heights' separate 2025 campaign). Others' experiences may differ.
- Before and in addition to door-to-door canvassing, effective outreach methods include: (1) building relations with local civic ass'n leaders; (2) offering to present at CA meeting and to write newsletter and social media content; (3) and building a network of local partners (e.g., "block captains") to persuade their neighbors to host trees. One motivated block captain can help us get 5-6 trees planted on a single block, more than in some entire neighborhoods. In 2025, a motivated group in my Ashton Heights neighborhood ran a separate, non-TCF tree campaign. Through relentless civic ass'n communications and a network of dedicated block captains, we planted 137 tree whips in one year in Ashton Heights. Passionate, local boosters are essential.
- Rental units take more time to convert into tree sites. We are actively engaging property managers at apartments and are planning to showcase apartments that have participated in the program to encourage others to do so.