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Methodology

Planting Priority Zones, Bivariate Maps and Local Planting Focus

Geography and Scope. The analysis uses census tracts (2020 Census geography). Of the county's 173 tracts, 170 are included. Three are excluded: tract 6138, which has no canopy value because it lies outside the urban areas where canopy is measured; tract 9843, San Francisco International Airport, which has no resident households; and tract 6137.02, a large rural tract excluded on review because its canopy value describes only a small settled area. Census tracts do not follow city limits. Each tract is attributed to the jurisdiction holding the largest share of its land, and its values describe the whole tract, not the part within any one jurisdiction.

Indicators and Thresholds

Indicator	Measure	Source	Classes
Urban Tree canopy	Share of urban land covered by tree canopy	USDA Forest Service and CAL FIRE, 2022	20% or less (low canopy); over 20% to 30%; over 30%
Income	Households earning under 80% of area median income (AMI)	HUD CHAS, 2018–2022	51% or more; 40% to under 51%; under 40%
People of color	Residents other than non-Hispanic white (Definition of Minority Populations)	American Community Survey, 2020–2024	70% or more; 50% to under 70%; under 50%
Heart attack visits	Emergency department visits per 10,000 residents	CalEnviroScreen 5.0, 2021–2023	County thirds; top third is 11 or more
Projected heat	Days per year above 95°F, 2020–2029, high-emissions scenario	San Mateo County Extreme Heat Dashboard	County thirds; top third is 12 or more days

There is no universal standard for tree canopy. The 20% threshold reflects how practitioners in San Mateo County describe canopy of concern; the 30% break separates moderate from higher canopy. The 51% income threshold matches the share of low- and moderate-income residents the federal Community Development Block Grant program uses to qualify an area for area-wide investment. Because that program counts persons and this indicator counts

households, the map shows tracts that resemble eligible areas but does not confirm eligibility. The 70% threshold for people of color is the one the Metropolitan Transportation Commission uses in defining Equity Priority Communities. The middle breaks mark the county's typical tract (40% for income) and a majority (50% for people of color).

Heart attack visits and projected heat are divided into county thirds. No tract reaches the 75th percentile statewide for heart attack visits (the highest is at the 49th), so a statewide threshold would identify none. These classes show relative position within the county, not a high burden by state standards. Canopy and heat are reported at the block level and combined into tract values. Ozone was considered but not used, because its values vary too little across the county to distinguish areas of need.

Bivariate Maps. Four maps pair tree canopy with income, people of color, heart attack visits and projected heat in a three-by-three grid, using the classes above. The canopy classes are the same on every map, so the maps can be read side by side. Red marks the least canopy combined with the highest value of the paired indicator. Lower canopy correlates with higher shares of residents of color ($r = -0.66$) and lower-income households ($r = -0.51$), and with more heart attack visits ($r = -0.45$). Projected heat is the exception ($r = 0.26$), because the county's warmer southern tracts tend to have more canopy than its cooler northern ones. The heat map shows where low canopy and high projected heat coincide; it does not indicate that hotter neighborhoods have less canopy.

Planting Priority Zones. The zones are assigned by a rule rather than a weighted index, so every classification can be traced to the conditions that produced it. Three thresholds are applied in sequence:

- **Low canopy**: canopy is 20% or less (109 tracts).
- **Social vulnerability threshold:** at least 51% of households earn under 80% of AMI, or at least 70% of residents are people of color (72 of the 109). Income and race are combined as either/or because they are closely correlated ($r = 0.71$); counting both would weigh the same disadvantage twice.
- **Place-specific health and heat burden**s: tracts in the county's top third for projected heat are Cooling Priority (21 tracts); tracts in the top third for heart attack visits are Health Priority (38); tracts in neither are Canopy Equity Priority (13). No tract is in the top third for both, so each tract falls in only one zone.

The 37 low-canopy tracts that do not meet the social vulnerability threshold appear as a separate class, so low canopy stays visible across the county. The remaining 61 tracts have canopy above 20%.

The zones are parallel, not ranked: a Cooling Priority tract is not in greater need than a Health Priority tract. Heart attack visits are highest in the cooler north of the county and projected heat in the warmer south ($r = -0.60$), so requiring every condition at once would identify no tracts.

Local Planting Focus. Because planting is carried out by individual jurisdictions, each tract is also ranked against the other tracts in its own jurisdiction, from least to most canopy. A tract is a local planting focus if it falls in the least-treed third of its jurisdiction's tracts (rounded up) and has canopy of 20% or less. This identifies 59 tracts across 17 of the county's 21 jurisdictions. Of these, 37 are also in a Priority Zone and 22 are not; the map shows the two groups separately. Atherton, Hillsborough, Portola Valley and Woodside have no local focus tract, since canopy exceeds 45% in every one of their

tracts. Five jurisdictions are represented by a single tract; there, the tract is a local focus if its canopy is 20% or less, which applies to Brisbane, Colma and Half Moon Bay.

Each tract is ranked only within the jurisdiction holding the largest share of its land. The ranking is relative: a low-canopy tract can rank mid-range in a jurisdiction where other tracts have even less canopy. Priority Zones remain the countywide measure of need; the local focus shows where each jurisdiction's own canopy is lowest.

Limitations

- Canopy is measured only within urban areas, but each tract is shaded as a whole. In a few large tracts on the coast and along the bay, the color reflects the settled area rather than surrounding open land.
- Indicators cover different periods, from 2018–2022 income estimates to 2020–2029 heat projections, so the maps show patterns rather than a single moment in time.
- Projected heat uses the highest value across ten climate models, the upper end of the projected range.
- The maps show where conditions coincide, not cause and effect. They do not estimate the benefit of planting in a given tract or account for where trees can physically go, which depends on soil, utilities, right-of-way width and land ownership.
- Tract-level data identify broad areas of need, not specific planting sites.

Local Tree Policies, Plans and Programs

SSMC reviewed the online municipal code and official website of each of the county's 20 cities and towns and of the unincorporated County, June-October 2026 with the support of a volunteer. For each jurisdiction, the review recorded whether it holds Tree City USA status (Arbor Day Foundation, websearch), has an adopted urban forest or street tree plan, regulates tree removal, defines protected trees, and requires replacement of removed trees. The review is a qualitative scan of publicly available information, not a comprehensive legal or program audit. Policies or programs that are not posted online, or that are documented elsewhere, may not be captured.

Trees in Climate Action Plans

Scope. This analysis reviews how San Mateo County jurisdictions address trees in their climate action plans. The most recent publicly available plan was reviewed for each, located through jurisdiction websites. Where a draft update exists it was reviewed alongside or in place of the adopted plan and is identified as a draft. Portola Valley and San Bruno have no plan. Each plan was searched for trees, canopy, and urban forest, and every passage returned was read in context.

Goals and Measures. Plans label the same content differently, so comparing their own labels would compare vocabulary rather than commitment. A goal states an intended end state, such as a canopy percentage or a number of trees by a date. A measure states an implementation mechanism: who will act, through what program, requirement, funding source, or dated step. Not counted as measures are statements of intent to seek, explore, or consider; provisions where trees sit inside a measure aimed at something else, such as a

green building ordinance; possibilities a plan lists, including adaptation menus and future study items; and content carried over from a superseded plan.

What the Columns Record. Targets and tracking are recorded independently, since a plan can state a level without measuring progress toward it, or track a number without stating what would be enough. A target specifies a level, usually with a date; a tracking commitment names something to be monitored or reported. Planting and preservation record what a plan mentions, which is broader than what it commits to as a measure: planting covers adding trees, preservation covers retaining them through protection ordinances, maintenance, species selection, replacement requirements, and canopy retention in development review. Strategy area records where tree content sits within a plan. Because plans combine emissions sectors with adaptation and other chapters, these are called strategy areas rather than sectors, and placement is descriptive rather than evaluative. Strategy area counts may exceed the number of jurisdictions if trees appear in more than one strategy area.

Limitations. This analysis covers climate action plans only. Trees may also be addressed through general plans, urban forest master plans, tree ordinances, capital programs, or municipal codes not examined here, and several plans point to such documents, so the absence of tree content in a climate action plan is not an absence of tree policy. This analysis records what plans commit to, not implementation, funding adequacy, or progress.

Challenges and Opportunities

The barriers in this section are not the result of a city-by-city audit. They are the constraints that urban forestry organizations and city staff described, drawn from interviews and existing reports, a scientific literature. Each is paired with approaches that have helped elsewhere.

Appendix

Planting Priority Zone census tract counts by jurisdiction.

Each tract is counted under the jurisdiction that holds the largest share of its land.

Jurisdiction	Cooling Priority	Health Priority	Canopy Equity Priority	Total in Priority zones	Tracts in jurisdiction
Daly City	0	17	0	17	20
San Mateo	3	0	8	11	27
South San Francisco	0	11	0	11	13
Redwood City	8	0	0	8	18
Unincorporated County	2	3	0	5	16
East Palo Alto	4	0	0	4	5
Foster City	2	0	2	4	9
San Bruno	0	4	0	4	10
Menlo Park	2	0	0	2	10
Millbrae	0	0	2	2	6
Pacifica	0	2	0	2	7
Burlingame	0	0	1	1	7
Colma	0	1	0	1	1
Total	**21**	**38**	**13**	**72**	**170**

These jurisdictions have no Priority Zone tracts: Atherton, Belmont, Brisbane, Half Moon Bay, Hillsborough, Portola Valley, San Carlos and Woodside.

Each census tract is counted once, under the jurisdiction holding the largest share of its land. In seven Priority Zone tracts, no single jurisdiction holds 80% or more of the land:

- 6003: Unincorporated County 59%, Daly City 41% (Health Priority)
- 6012: Unincorporated County 57%, Daly City 43% (Health Priority)

- 6013.02: Daly City 54%, Unincorporated County 43%, Colma 3% (Health Priority)
- 6016.01: Colma 75%, Unincorporated County 21%, Daly City 5% (Health Priority)
- 6020.02: Unincorporated County 56%, South San Francisco 44% (Health Priority)
- 6042: San Bruno 61%, Unincorporated County 39% (Health Priority)
- 6118: Menlo Park 72%, East Palo Alto 28% (Cooling Priority)

Including tracts where it holds at least 20% of the land, Unincorporated San Mateo County shares 8 Priority Zone tracts: the 5 counted in the table, plus 6013.02, 6016.01 and 6042.