Recommendations

1. Adopt an urban forest plan with clear, neighborhood-level canopy targets.

Context and rationale*:* An urban forest plan is what gives canopy commitment continuity beyond any single budget cycle or staff tenure. By setting long-term goals, multi-year budgets and monitoring cycles into governance, plans institutionalize canopy work and create a timeline that can survive political turnover (Battisti 2023; Wang 2024). Plans are most effective when citywide goals are translated into neighborhood-scale targets, since coarse, citywide averages can hide the gaps that matter and misallocate effort (Esperón-Rodríguez 2026; Treglia 2022). A plan works only as part of a broader system, tied to enforceable ordinances, private-land tools and monitoring (Hilbert 2019; Ordóñez-Barona 2021).

Most of the county's census tracts (64%) fall below 20% canopy, so expanding canopy is a matter of prioritization. Directing planting to the areas where low canopy overlaps with health and social vulnerabilities extends the benefits of trees, cooling, shade and support for physical and mental health to the entire community. The priority zones identified in this report provide that neighborhood-scale resolution. Targeting by mapped need also lets jurisdictions justify prioritization decisions and align efforts with planting organizations working across the county.

Within San Mateo County, South San Francisco's Urban Forest Master Plan (UFMP) established a canopy target, then with the 2040 General Plan the city committed to pursue the target at the neighborhood level, prioritizing disadvantaged neighborhoods. East Palo Alto's UFMP places a target of 20% tree canopy by 2062 and 30% tree canopy by 2122, and measured each neighborhood's canopy percentage coverage so that the plan's implementation could be better prioritized through an equity lens.

Main implementers*:* Local jurisdictions (plan adoption or amendment, target-setting, monitoring).

Partners*:* planting organizations (implementation capacity, community engagement).

2. Protect the existing urban forest through preservation ordinances, development review and incentives for retention.

Context and rationale*:* A mature tree provides far more shade and cooling than a newly planted one and takes decades to replace, so protecting standing canopy is even more important than adding to it. Replacing trees after removal does not recover the value of preserving them. In one modeling study, canopy still fell by roughly a third as aging trees were replaced (Czekajlo 2023). Land use and development is a leading driver of loss, with one study finding redeveloped residential lots lost around 44% of their trees over five years (Guo 2019, in Pike 2021). The best time to protect a mature tree from removal during construction is at the permitting stage, before work begins. A tree-preservations plan can be a prerequisite for

a building permit. Ordinances work when they are comprehensive and enforced (Salisbury 2021; O'Herrin 2022) and penalties alone tend to provoke resistance, so regulation works best paired with incentives (Willis 2023; Ordóñez-Barona 2021). Developers report that the real barriers to keeping trees are site constraints, stormwater grading requirements, and cost (Willis 2023). Incentives that address these include density bonuses for preserving mature trees, reduced setback or parking requirements in exchange for retaining significant trees, expedited permitting for designs that meet canopy-retention goals, and fee reductions for projects with minimal tree disturbance; cost-neutral incentives such as lower lender interest rates for retaining trees are especially promising because they add nothing to a city's costs (Willis 2023). Enforcement tools such as protection standards during construction and performance bonds forfeited if retained trees die through negligence help ensure protection holds in practice. This must be balanced against other pressing needs, including affordable housing.

Main implementers*:* Local jurisdictions (ordinance adoption, permitting and capital-project review).

Partners*:* ISA-certified arborists (tree assessment), community-based organizations.

3. Support and incentivize trees on private property.

Context and rationale*:* The majority of plantable urban space on the Peninsula is privately owned, so meaningful canopy gains depend on reaching private land, where owners bear the cost and responsibility of the trees they hold and cities have limited authority to plant. The effective lever is making it easier and cheaper for residents to plant and retain trees. Free-tree programs that provide a tree and education while the resident takes on watering, as run in several cities across the County, including through the San Mateo County Library system and partners in the faith community. These efforts have extended canopy onto private land without a city being responsible for all the maintenance. Financial incentives help too: residents in one study asked their city not to charge for leaf cleanup and to offer tax credits for tree maintenance, treating upkeep as a real cost rather than assuming goodwill (Nascimento 2021). Neighboring Santa Clara County's Urban Forest Master Plan points to similar tools, recommending incentive programs such as stormwater fee credits and utility rebates linked to canopy results.

One barrier to owner consent in low-canopy rental areas is that owners' names may be unavailable to the city for privacy reasons (CityTrees). Planting organizations overcome these obstacles through in-person outreach: going door to door on targeted blocks and meeting residents at neighborhood events, which reaches people a mailing would miss and builds the trust that consent depends on.

A more structural fix may be the institution of a mandatory rent registry which would give the city the owner contact information it currently lacks, though as a housing-policy measure it sits outside the scope of tree planting itself.

Main implementers*:* Local jurisdictions (free-tree programs, rebates, maintenance incentives), planting organizations and community-based organizations (outreach and planting).

Partners*:* Residents and property owners.

4. Budget for maintenance and fund tree canopy as infrastructure.

Context and rationale*:* Tree survival, not planting, is often the true constraint. Watering is the single most important factor in whether a young tree lives, and maintenance capacity, not planting capacity, frequently sets the ceiling (Canopy; CityTrees). Post-planting care commitments run several years and are lengthening as the climate warms. Treating canopy as essential infrastructure, with dedicated, recurring funding rather than one-off spending, is what keeps trees alive long enough to deliver health and stormwater benefits. An urban forest plan makes tree planting and maintenance legible to budgeting and appropriations processes, giving them a structure for recurring funding rather than leaving them dependent on ad hoc spending (Andreu 2022).

Main implementers*:* Local jurisdictions (dedicated maintenance budgets, staffing).

Partners*:* Planting organizations (post-planting care), residents (watering agreements).

5. Invest in community education, engagement and stewardship

Context and rationale*:* When residents understand tree benefits and are actively engaged, planting programs achieve higher participation, better survival and stronger stewardship (Lee 2025; Choy 2024). Awareness alone is not enough; converting it to action requires sustained, culturally appropriate engagement (García 2025; Rogan 2023) and the physical presence of planting organizations in a neighborhood predicts resident stewardship, watering and caring for trees over time, more than persuasive messaging does (Wohldmann 2023).

In lower-income and historically disinvested neighborhoods, residents generally recognize the benefits of trees but may weigh them against real concerns, including maintenance costs and the risk of displacement due to increased property values (i.e., green gentrification) (Riedman 2022; Martin 2024). The response is not to withhold trees, which would deepen disadvantage, but to plant *with* residents rather than *for* them, pairing greening with attention to displacement and rebuilding trust where past efforts were imposed (Donovan 2021; Wolf-Jacobs 2023; Canopy; Rise South City).

Main implementers*:* Local jurisdictions (engagement programs), community-based organizations (trusted messengers, cultural relevance).

Partners*:* Planting organizations, schools.

6. Coordinate at the county level and support lower-capacity jurisdictions.

Context and rationale*:* Urban canopy-related efforts vary widely across the county: some jurisdictions have urban forestry divisions and watering trucks, while others rely almost entirely on planting organizations. A shared, countywide framework lets cities work from the same baseline and priorities, and helps smaller or lower-capacity jurisdictions act without building

a full program alone. Concretely, such a framework can include shared data, model policies; technical guidance; pooled procurement, such as county buying groups placing group orders of climate-adaptive stock (Canopy) and at bulk pricing; and municipal or distributed nursery models, including community nurseries, that secure local supply.

A metropolitan-scale strategy binding multiple jurisdictions to shared canopy targets, as in Melbourne (Hartigan 2021), illustrates the value of coordination for a county of many small cities. Santa Clara County proposes such a framework in its recently adopted Urban Forest Master Plan, a countywide effort spanning both incorporated and unincorporated areas.

Main implementers*:* San Mateo County (coordination, shared data and guidance).

Partners*:* Local jurisdictions, planting organizations, community-based organizations, utilities, public health agencies and nurseries.