



Forest ReLeaf Urban Tree Nursery Feasibility Study

Executive Summary

June 15, 2022

Introduction

Forest ReLeaf of Missouri (FRL) operates the only nonprofit community-assisted tree nursery in the St. Louis region. The organization's mission is to plant trees and enrich communities. Forest ReLeaf's main nursery is in Creve Coeur, which is not easily accessible by many of the constituents whose communities have historically been underrepresented in conservation efforts.

Forest ReLeaf of Missouri is in the planning phase for the creation of an urban tree nursery in St. Louis City in collaboration with multiple local community partners. Forest ReLeaf is committed to the transformative power of trees and envisions a space that will enrich the neighborhood and greater city, becoming a site for sustainable community engagement.

The proposed site for the urban nursery is adjacent to the Scott Joplin House, a Missouri State Historical site and a key project partner, in midtown St. Louis just south of the Jeff-Vander-Lou neighborhood. Forest ReLeaf will provide nursery expertise, material, trees, and program support, while Missouri State Parks and the Joplin House will supply land, site monitoring, and educational programming.

With the support of the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC), Forest ReLeaf engaged EMD Consulting Group to explore the potential for community partnerships, identify constraints, and define goals in this initial phase of the project.

Founded in 2002, EMD Consulting helps nonprofit agencies build organizational strength. EMD stands for Experience Makes the Difference. EMD Consulting offers the following services: strategic planning and execution, leadership development, fundraising, governance, financial sustainability assessment, executive search, and merger exploration and facilitation. Maria Schlafly and Theresa Schlafly formed the consulting team for the Forest ReLeaf feasibility study, with EMD partner Shannon Grass providing project oversight.

Maria Schlafly and Theresa Schlafly worked with Forest ReLeaf Executive Director Meridith Perkins and Partnerships Manager Rebecca Hankins to plan, review, and adjust this process through a highly collaborative approach.

This report was prepared to inform and assist organizational leadership with a plan for the next phase of the project development, with the aim of assessing the feasibility of the project and determining the potential for future collaborations.

Location

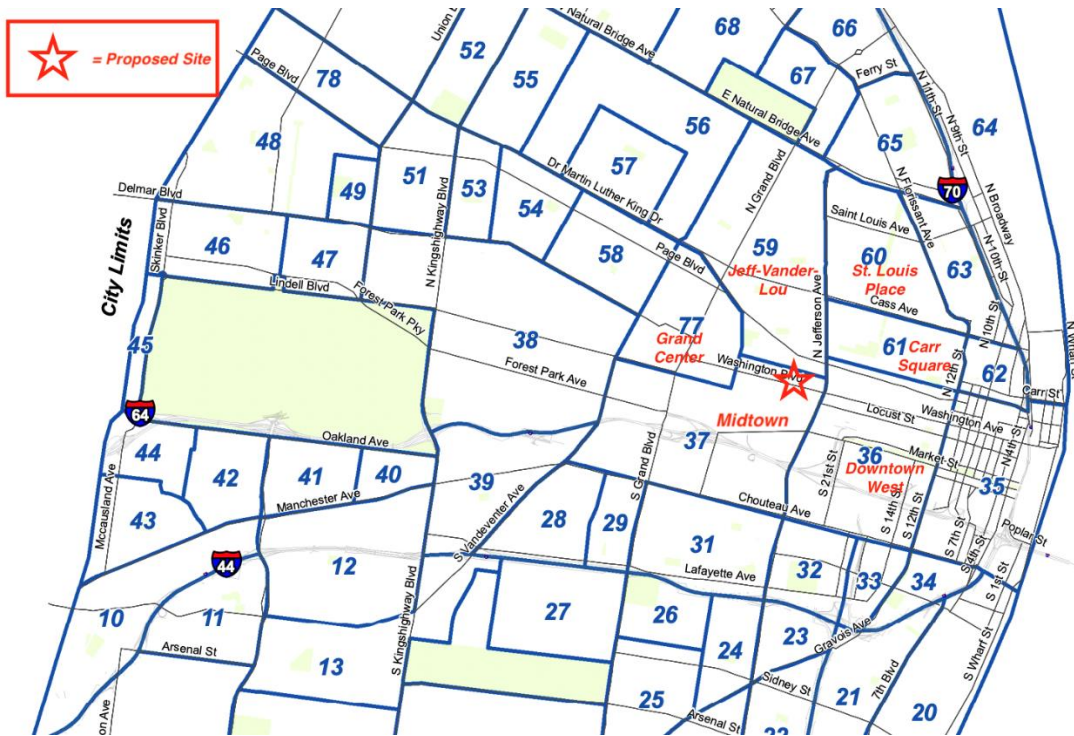
The proposed urban tree nursery location is at the southwest intersection of Samuel Shepard Drive and North Beaumont Street in St. Louis City, in the Midtown neighborhood, just south of the Jeff-Vander-Lou neighborhood. This vacant lot is part of the Scott Joplin House site, a Missouri State Historical site in the Missouri State Parks system. The land is owned by the Missouri Department of Natural Resources.

The Scott Joplin House is located at 2658 Delmar Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63103.

Proposed Site



Surrounding St. Louis City Neighborhoods



Metro Area



Process Overview

EMD and Forest ReLeaf launched this study with a kickoff meeting on March 11, 2022. This report, provided in its final version on June 14, 2022, shares insights and recommendations gleaned throughout the engagement process.

The major areas of consideration include:

- Foundational analysis
- Stakeholder insights
- Community engagement opportunities
- Additional partnership prospects

The major constituency groups informing this work include:

- Funder
- Site partner
- Community partners
- Government partners
- Educational institutions
- Peer organizations
- Landscape architects

Foundational Analysis

To understand the proposed project and related opportunities, EMD consultants Maria Schlafly and Theresa Schlafly:

- Reviewed documents and collateral including Forest ReLeaf's website and social media, the funding proposal, the project MOU, the initial project plan, and background information on current and potential partners
- Visited the proposed urban tree nursery site and toured the Scott Joplin House
- Researched related projects
- Conducted interviews with eleven individuals representing nine key organizations/departments identified by Forest ReLeaf as current or potential project partners
- Attended concept planning meeting at Creve Coeur nursery and design session (charette) at proposed site with DTLS Landscape Architecture and project partners

Stakeholder Insights

EMD conducted nine interviews with the following stakeholders identified by Forest ReLeaf as current or future potential project partners. Interviews took place in April and May of 2022.

- **Missouri Department of Conservation**
 - **Bill White**, Community and Private Land Conservation Branch Chief, and **Russell Hinnah**, Community Forestry Programs Supervisor
- **Scott Joplin House State Historic Site**
 - **Almetta Jordan**, Site Administrator
- **St. Louis City**
 - **Marlene Davis**, 19th Ward Alderwoman
 - **Alan Jankowski**, Commissioner of Forestry
 - **Catherine Werner**, Sustainability Director
- **Green City Coalition**
 - **Trenton Ellis**, Program Manager
- **KIPP St. Louis High School**
 - **Audrey Wiedemann**, Teacher
- **Harris-Stowe State University**
 - **John MacDougal**, Professor
- **Great Rivers Greenway**
 - **Tom Schweiss**, Conservation Program Manager, and **Ben Grossman**, Director of Greenway Operations

EMD also contacted a potential partner at La Salle Middle School (DeShannon Brooks, Director of Enrichment & External Programming) but was unable to secure an interview.

Interview Topics

Interview questions were tailored to each stakeholder. Topics included:

- Role and history at their organization
- Relationship with Forest ReLeaf and project partners
- Alignment of the project proposal with organizational goals
- Opportunities for potential collaboration across organizations
- Constraints anticipated for the project
- What a successful realization of the project would look like
- Suggestions for other potential partners and audiences for the project

Interview Themes

Interviewees universally expressed enthusiasm for the project. Stakeholders pointed to the project's potential to benefit their organizations as well as the larger community. They agreed it was important for Forest ReLeaf to have a presence in the city and to increase visibility and awareness, while removing barriers for city residents to access trees and educational opportunities. Several interviewees noted an increased focus on urban tree planting and conservation efforts and thought that this project was timed well to capitalize on this broader community interest. Interviewees also drew on experience with related initiatives to raise questions about possible challenges, such as long-term sustainability, staffing concerns, space constraints, and the need for clearly defined goals for the project.

EMD identified the following considerations during the interview process:

Opportunities

- More visibility and access for FRL in the city
- More visibility for Joplin House as a historic site across the region
- Enhancement of the Jeff-Vander-Lou and Midtown St. Louis neighborhoods
- Investment in St. Louis City's urban tree canopy
- Community building
- Programming and event space
- Volunteer engagement
- Youth engagement
- Job training
- Alignment with goals of Joplin House and MO State Parks
 - Highlighting Joplin's connection to nature
 - Increasing awareness of State Parks
- Alignment with MDC goals
 - Reaching urban constituents
 - Building on existing FRL–MDC partnership
- Education and access to tree planting for residents and neighborhood advocates
- Increasing outreach to diverse constituencies who have historically been underrepresented in conservation initiatives
- Collaboration possibilities
 - Staff, volunteers, and constituents of other green organizations in STL
 - Area elementary and secondary schools: students, staff, and families
 - University students, faculty, and alumni
 - Local businesses, neighborhood organizations, and churches
 - Local artists

Challenges

- Long-term sustainability
- Security
- Relatively small size of site
- Managing programming and functionality expectations
- Residents' reluctance to plant new trees due to past experiences with tree damage
- Need to clarify and narrow priorities of multiple site goals (production, education, community)
- Consistency of staffing, leadership, and volunteers

Design Factors

- Lighting / security
- Fencing
- Viewshed (surrounding environment visible from the site)
- Cultural signage about Joplin
- Branding that recognizes Forest ReLeaf and acknowledges partnerships
- Rotational design with consistent tree coverage
- Attractive space that is welcoming to community and feels permanent and safe

Next Steps for Partner Engagement

- Keep all interviewees apprised of progress and opportunities for collaboration
- Research community events for outreach presence
- Attend community meeting at Scott Joplin House
- Attend meetings of neighborhood association and business district
- Follow up with Harris-Stowe State University administrators soon and with KIPP educators in late summer
- Reach out to additional contacts in next phase of communication

Looking Forward

Interviewees had many suggestions for community engagement opportunities for Forest ReLeaf to consider as the project plan and timeline is finalized, including:

- Attend Cultural Development Planning meeting at the Joplin House **August 27 at 2 p.m.**; solicit feedback from the community at this meeting via survey and discussion
- Connect with neighborhood organizations, churches, senior communities, and schools to distribute trees and raise awareness about the urban tree nursery project
 - Jeff-Vander-Lou neighborhood association meets the first Monday of the month (6 p.m.)
 - Locust Business District has regular meetings
- Build neighborhood support through door-knocking outreach and presence at community events
- Host volunteer engagement workdays
- Assist St. Louis City with tree fulfillment for residents

- Work with HSSU to explore credit, internship, and job opportunities for students and alumni
- Develop educational partnerships with local schools
- Offer job training and volunteer training in partnership with other green organizations
- Foster interest among and across groups of visitors to the Joplin House, the urban tree nursery, Great Rivers Greenway, Missouri State Parks, and other local institutions
- Provide a space for community events such as performances and workshops
- Collaborate with Green City Coalition on park planting projects
- Explore partnerships with local artists

Conclusion

Based on this feasibility study, it is clear there is significant interest in Forest ReLeaf's proposal for an urban tree nursery on the site adjacent to the Scott Joplin House, and a willingness to commit to moving this initiative forward. Stakeholders universally find alignment between the goals for the urban tree nursery and the missions of their organizations, and most see concrete opportunities for collaboration, both building on existing partnerships and establishing new connections. The project should also be appealing to funders; MDC in particular is interested in continuing to provide financial support.

Although there are challenges and constraints to take into account—long-term sustainability, staffing, focusing goals, site security, and others—they have already been identified by FRL; this study did not surface any significant obstacles that had not previously been considered.

The timing is right for this project for the city. There is increasing interest in trees and nature from the community along with the network of like-minded organizations that is poised to support and collaborate with FRL. This network can broaden and deepen the project reach, which will maximize the impact of the significant investment from FRL. The proposed urban tree nursery seems to be a unique project for the City of St. Louis and for Missouri, with real potential to serve as a model for other communities.