

Strategic Plan 2026-2029

New York State Urban Forestry Council

Our Vision and Mission

Vision

A New York State where the value of trees is universally recognized, and their benefits shape healthier, more vibrant communities.

Mission

To engage in public, private, and volunteer partnerships to plant, manage, and educate, leading to robust urban and community forests throughout New York State.

Who We Are

The New York State Urban Forestry Council is the state's largest urban forestry advocacy organization. We formed informally in 1992, became formally organized in 1999, and received our 501(c)3 nonprofit designation in 2000.

We bring together municipalities, tree boards, arborists, landscape professionals, environmental nonprofits, and citizen advocates who share a commitment to strengthening urban and community forests statewide. Through strategic partnerships, educational programs, and direct financial support, we help communities develop thriving urban forestry programs that improve air and water quality, reduce urban heat, enhance property values, and create more livable neighborhoods.

Our partnership with the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation's Urban and Community Forestry Program has been central to our work since our founding. We serve as the official state advisory council, a role required by the USDA Forest Service for states to receive federal urban forestry funding. But our mission extends well beyond this advisory function—we exist to advance urban forestry across all sectors and constituencies in New York State.

Organizational Snapshot

Membership and Network

After pandemic-related declines, membership has rebounded to historic highs. In 2024, we served 434 members through 203 memberships. Individual memberships comprise 72% of our base, with government entities at 13%, nonprofits at 5%, and corporate and student members representing diverse constituencies across the urban forestry field.

Nine regional ReLeaf committees organize workshops, tree plantings, and educational events across the state, creating local hubs for professional development and community action.

Programs and Impact

- **Annual ReLeaf Conference:** Growing from 104 virtual attendees in 2021 to 171 in-person participants in 2024, attracting elected officials, municipal foresters, arborists, and volunteers
- **Tree City Quick Start Grants:** Up to \$1,000 to help municipalities achieve Tree City USA certification
- **Tree City Reward Grants:** Funding tree planting for municipalities maintaining five consecutive years of certification
- **Educational scholarships:** Supporting the next generation of urban forestry professionals

- **Regional workshops and resources:** Training on tree selection, planting, care, and urban forest health

Financial Position

Operating costs have grown to \$62,600 annually (2024), reflecting investments in administration, communications, and member services. Grant and scholarship programs distribute approximately \$15,000-20,000 annually in direct community support.

The DEC Partnership: Foundation and Challenge

Our relationship with the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation's Urban and Community Forestry Program has been the cornerstone of our work for over two decades. This partnership has enabled significant achievements for both organizations and, most importantly, for communities across New York.

How the Partnership Works

The USDA Forest Service provides annual funding to state urban forestry programs. To qualify, states must meet four requirements: a full-time UCF Program Coordinator, a second full-time position, a statewide advisory council, and a State Forest Action Plan. We fulfill the advisory council requirement.

But our role extends far beyond formal advising. As a nonprofit, we have operational flexibility that state agencies lack. We can accept registration fees, sign vendor contracts, process payments quickly, and manage multi-year funds—capabilities that are restricted or impossible within state procurement rules. This allows us to:

- Administer the ReLeaf program, managing regional committee funds and co-coordinating the annual conference
- Run grant programs that encourage Tree City USA certification and reward long-term municipal commitment
- Co-coordinate recognition events for Tree City, Tree Campus, and Tree Line USA programs
- Maintain public-facing resources that DEC cannot easily host on state websites

The Current Challenge

Recent changes in Forest Service policy mean that federal funding can no longer flow to the Council through state-directed third-party grants. DEC is exploring alternative mechanisms to continue financial support, but the future is uncertain. Meanwhile, federal funding freezes and political instability threaten the entire state-federal partnership model.

Our board's analysis of the organization's strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) identified dependence on single funding sources as a strategic weakness—not because the DEC partnership isn't valuable, but because funding instability beyond anyone's control threatens our ability to serve members and communities.

The strategic priorities below are designed to build organizational resilience that benefits both the Council and our partners. A more financially stable Council is a more reliable partner to DEC, better positioned to weather federal funding disruptions while continuing to administer ReLeaf, coordinate statewide programs, and serve as the state advisory council.

What This Framework Does NOT Change

Building financial resilience does not mean stepping away from our core partnership responsibilities. This framework does not propose:

- Ending our role as the state advisory council to DEC's UCF Program
- Discontinuing ReLeaf program administration or conference coordination
- Reducing our operational support for Tree City USA and related recognition programs
- Creating competition with DEC for resources or programmatic territory

Strategic Priorities 2025-2028

Through our SWOT analysis, members identified five priority areas. Work groups have been assigned to develop specific goals, strategies, and implementation plans for each priority. This framework outlines the challenge, the opportunity, and the charge to each work group.

Priority 1: Financial Sustainability and Diversification

The Challenge

Budget limitations and dependence on single funding sources constrain our ability to expand programs and respond to member needs. As federal funding becomes less predictable, we need revenue diversity to maintain operations and support communities.

Work Group

Lori Brockelbank, Donna Gurnett, Joe Charap, Leanna Wohl Nugent, Gloria Van Duyne

Goals:

- **Develop and maintain a balanced, achievable budget:** Create a realistic annual budget that aligns with programmatic priorities, reflects accurate revenue and expense projections, and includes periodic review and adjustments.
- **Establish clear guidelines for fundraising and fund management:** Draft policies for accepting, acknowledging, and stewarding donations; explore new revenue streams (grants, sponsorships, partnerships, individual giving); and ensure transparent reporting of all funds.
- **Secure a line item in the New York State Environmental Protection Fund (EPF):** Advocate for dedicated, recurring state funding to support the Council's mission, programs, and operations, and build strategic relationships with policymakers to strengthen advocacy efforts.

Priority 2: Membership Growth and Engagement

The Opportunity

Membership is at historic highs, but we can do better at articulating value, welcoming new members, and creating pathways for engagement across diverse constituencies and career stages.

Work Group

Leanna Wohl Nugent, Amy McKenzie, Jeanne Grace

Goals:

- **Increase total membership:** Implement targeted recruitment strategies to attract new members from diverse sectors and regions, while retaining current members through consistent outreach and relationship building.
- **Clarify, communicate, and improve membership benefits:** Develop a clear benefits package that demonstrates the value of membership, including professional development opportunities, networking, access to resources, and recognition of contributions.
- **Streamline and enhance the membership onboarding process:** Create a welcoming and efficient orientation process for new members, including timely communication, access to resources, and guidance on how to get involved in Council activities.

Priority 3: Board Leadership and Accountability

The Foundation

Our board brings deep expertise and passion. Clearer expectations and structures will channel this energy more effectively and ensure consistent governance.

Work Group

Lori Brockelbank, Donna Gurnett, Glen Roberts, Noreen Riordan

Goals:

- **Ensure active participation on committees:** Require every board member to serve on at least one standing or ad hoc committee, contributing their skills and expertise to advance the Council's work.
- **Promote engagement in local ReLeaf committees:** Encourage Board members to be visible, active participants in their regional ReLeaf groups, helping to strengthen statewide connections and grassroots support.
- **Improve attendance and participation at Board meetings:** Set the expectation that each Board member will attend at least 75% of scheduled meetings, recognizing that consistent presence is critical for governance, decision-making, and organizational leadership.
- **Ensure Board members submit accurate and timely details of volunteer time spent on Council activities:** to support the Council's 1-to-1 match required for federal grant dollars, and to leverage other grants.

Priority 4: Educational Excellence and Regional Impact

The Opportunity

Regional ReLeaf committees are the front lines of our work. Strengthening and formalizing their role will deepen community impact statewide.

Work Group

Glen Roberts, Leanna Wohl Nugent, Rachel Grumm, Ross Hassinger, Christina McLaughlin

Goals:

- **Expand the influence of ReLeaf in each respective region.** Making them an educational resource for both private and public stakeholders.
- **Clarify/expand/formalize the Council's role in regional ReLeaf committees**
 - Action: Work with DEC and regional committees to identify and document (for the full board, membership, perspective board members, and partners) the Council's involvement in regional ReLeaf.
- **Support Regional ReLeaf Committees.**
 - Action: Council members to actively participate in regional ReLeaf committees to plan workshops on site selection, planting, young tree care, health of urban forests, and other urban forestry topics.
 - Action: Identify, document and ensure the Council's involvement in regional ReLeaf
 - Action: Explore combining regional ReLeaf funds with DEC UCF staff and regional committees, to support activities in all committees statewide.
- **Expand the benefits for Urban & Community Forestry Council membership by offering educational resources and new opportunities for networking.**
- **Encourage greater attendance at the annual ReLeaf Conference.**
 - Action: work with DEC UCF staff and regional committees to identify a list of potential opportunities and choose at least 5 new actions for the Council to implement (from IDing new potential email lists, seeking new sponsors, personally calling your neighboring communities, speaking at conservation committee meetings, offering incentives, changing

conference dates, etc., and those who are experienced at asking could coach those who don't have experience.)

Priority 5: Advocacy and Public Awareness

The Gap

Limited public and legislative awareness of the Council constrain our ability to secure resources and influence policy. Building our profile is essential for achieving Priority 1.

Work Group

Donna Gurnett, Joe Charap, Steve Harris, Andy Hillman

Goals:

- **Create and implement an advocacy campaign** that increases awareness of NYSUFC throughout the NYS legislature and helps secure funding for the Council through the NYS EPF Budget line item.
 - This should include:
 - A communication strategy that leverages our social media channels and other communication platforms (i.e. – Mail Chimp). Creating collateral materials that highlight NYSUFC's partnership with DEC and the important work that we do.
 - A focus on cultivating relationships with the Assembly and Senate Environmental Conservation Committees, Ways and Means and Finance Committees as well as other appropriate governmental agencies.
- **Participate in the State legislative process** – Submit comments from the Council in response to the Joint Legislative Budget Hearings on Environmental Conservation.
- **Engaging NYSUFC Board members and the overall membership** in outreach to their specific representatives. We could create template letters/emails/talking points that members could use when doing this outreach.
- **Partnering with other similar organizations** in our advocacy efforts.

Implementation and Phasing

This framework identifies priorities based on board input. The work groups above will develop specific recommendations, timelines, and resource requirements for their assigned areas. However, honest assessment of organizational capacity requires acknowledgment of constraints and strategic sequencing.

Priority 1 Is Foundational

Financial sustainability and diversification are not simply first among equals—it is the prerequisite for expanding capacity to pursue other priorities. Success in securing an EPF line item, foundation grants, or other stable funding sources would enable the Council to:

- Invest in staff or consultant capacity for development, communications, and program management
- Expand educational programming and member services (Priorities 2 and 4)
- Mount effective advocacy campaigns (Priority 5)

Realistic Capacity Assessment

Without new revenue, the organization faces difficult choices about which priorities can receive meaningful attention given current volunteer capacity. The board will need to make explicit decisions about:

- Which work group recommendations are feasible to implement with existing resources
- Which priorities are deferred pending successful fundraising
- How volunteer time is allocated across competing demands

Suggested Phasing

A realistic implementation approach might sequence work as follows:

Year 1 (2025-2026): Focus organizational energy on Priority 1 (financial sustainability) and Priority 5 (advocacy for EPF line item). Priority 3 (board accountability) can advance through operational improvements requiring no additional resources.

Years 2-3 (2026-2028): If new funding is secured, expand capacity to pursue Priorities 2 (membership) and 4 (education) with dedicated resources. If funding remains constrained, make explicit choices about which elements are achievable with volunteer capacity alone.

This phasing acknowledges that building organizational resilience is sequential, not simultaneous. It focuses near-term energy on the work that unlocks capacity for everything else.

Conclusion

This framework is not an aspirational document meant to sit on a shelf. It is a working tool for focusing organizational energy on the challenges and opportunities our members have identified as most critical.

Work groups will develop specific recommendations. The board will make hard choices about implementation. And the Council will continue serving New York's urban forestry community with the same commitment that has sustained us since 1992, adapted to meet the realities of a changing funding and policy environment.

The goal is clear: build the organizational capacity to advance urban forestry across New York State regardless of political winds or federal funding fluctuations, while remaining a strong and reliable partner to DEC and to communities statewide.

Appendix: SWOT Analysis Summary

In Summer 2025, the NYSUFC Board conducted a comprehensive Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats analysis. This member-driven exercise informed the strategic priorities outlined in this framework.

Strengths	Weaknesses
• Passionate volunteers and members • Dedicated staff and board members • Expertise of board • Active state advisory council • Partnership with DEC • Diverse areas of NY represented • Events and networking • Annual conference • Taking Root newsletter • Scholarship offerings	• Budget limitations • Dependence on DEC • Large board • Lack of participation from some members • Lack of definition in roles and tasks • Difficulty with/reliance on meeting in person • Standing out among other environmental nonprofits • Lack of central theme • Lack of social media
Opportunities	Threats
• Fundraising/development • Education opportunities • Increasing student participation • Workshops/webinars/trainings • Membership levels • Added benefits • Increased dues	• Current political climate • Federal funding freeze • Lack of public knowledge of NYSUFC • Decrease in volunteers

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|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collaboration with other organizations | |
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