Growing a Healthier DC: Greening Business Districts

In a healthier D.C., business districts are green:
City streets and sidewalks are framed by green spaces filled with trees. Shoppers, diners and pedestrians abound, drawn by the shelter, shade and beauty of the tree canopy and landscaping. These green elements cool and buffer pedestrian and outdoor seating areas from the traffic and noise of the street. There are green views from building windows and rooftop gardens. Inside shops, retail activity and sales improve, new clientele are developed, and new relationships forged. This is the city of the future.

Green business districts:
• Create attractive, pedestrian-oriented retail environments
• Make shoppers and diners feel more comfortable, stay longer, and spend more
• Shade, cool and buffer hot city streets, sidewalks and parking areas
• Provide healthy urban spaces for neighbors, workers, and patrons to interact and unwind
• Create a unique sense of place to help make the area a destination
• Attract new businesses and entrepreneurs
• Increase the value of properties and businesses

Businesses thrive in green environments
The customer experience. Healthy trees and landscaping send positive messages about an area. Several studies have found that people are willing to travel farther, visit more frequently, and pay more for goods and services in business districts with trees - on average 12 percent more. Similar studies have concluded that the amount of time that someone stays in a store is longer if trees and landscaping are present on the streets and surrounding areas. These studies tell us what we know intrinsically - that people prefer to spend time in areas with well maintained trees and landscaping.

A better urban environment. Trees and green spaces help us deal with the pressures of urban living. Desk workers with a view of nature report greater job productivity and satisfaction. Businesses are increasingly seeking out localities that have a reputation for maintaining their environmental quality. Trees in commercial areas provide important environmental benefits to the city: cooling shade, cleaner air, and reduced energy use and runoff.
The Challenge and Opportunity

Urban trees are best known for their beauty and environmental benefits, but their contribution to a healthy local economy cannot be ignored. Washington, DC, named the “City of Trees” for its wide, shaded streets and park-like character has lost significant amounts of green in recent decades. Many of the streetscapes along the District’s wide boulevards have vast paved areas which do little to create a lively and save environment for business. Good design can transform these uninviting spaces into community assets. With increasing population and density, the need for trees and green space also increases.

As development occurs and investments are made in commercial districts and corridors, it is important to recognize the value of trees and landscaping, and to provide long-term design solutions to ensure that these elements will thrive. Long-term and consistent stewardship is necessary to sustain the economic and social benefits that trees and green space provide, and to ensure that residents and visitors will increasingly want to shop, dine and conduct business in the District.

Recommendations

• Prioritize the integration of trees and green space elements in development and redevelopment plans.

• Design parks, medians, tree spaces, and landscaped areas so that they are not only aesthetically pleasing, but provide environmental functions, including stormwater management and urban heat island reduction.

• Work with business improvement districts, main street programs and property owners/ managers to provide long-term and consistent stewardship of trees, parks and vegetation.

• Seek out opportunities to reduce impervious surfaces and create quality landscaped areas.


