Urban Forestry and California's Economy

The economy may wax and wane, but money is always a concern weighing on the minds of policy makers and citizens. In good times and in bad, we need ways to raise revenue, to cut costs, and to maximize our investments.

In financially-difficult times like we find ourselves in now, it is sometimes tempting to see the care and planting of trees as an optional item in the budget that can be put off until more prosperous times return. But local governments and residents alike should know that the trees around us—our urban forests—are an excellent investment, adding value, bringing in revenue, and creating jobs. Investing in trees is a way to invest in our economy...from the ground up.

How trees improve the bottom line…

- Home Values and Tax Revenues - Trees increase home values and therefore property tax revenue. The most recent study, conducted by researchers with the US Forest Service, estimates that street trees increase property values by an average of $8870.[i] In California, therefore, each street tree returns to the community nearly $100 in property tax each year. Homeowners benefit from the increased value of their property and communities benefit from the increased revenue.
- Commercial Districts - Trees make shopping a better experience. A substantial body of research demonstrates that the presence of trees in shopping districts affects consumers positively, encouraging them to shop more often, linger longer, and pay more for goods.[ii] The benefits of trees in commercial districts accrue to customers, who have a more pleasant shopping experience; store owners, who receive more traffic and more revenue; and local communities, who receive more sales tax revenue.
- Ecosystem Services - Trees provide many ecosystem services that we would otherwise have to pay for: they help clean our air and water, reduce our energy use, and help combatclimate change. The urban forest of the San Francisco Bay area, for example, is estimated to provide nearly $500 million annually in environmental benefits.[iii]
- Jobs - Urban forestry creates jobs. From the skilled work of certified arborists who plant, prune, and care for trees, to tree maintenance crews and entry-level jobs in nurseries and landscaping companies, urban forestry employs more than 60,000 Californians.[iv]
- Economy - The urban forest industry is a valuable component of California's economy. From the income of tree workers to the manufacturing of products and

the goods sold in nurseries, altogether urban forestry added nearly $4 billion to California's GDP in 2009.[iv]

Two ways to maximize the returns on an urban forestry investment:

(1)Make caring for trees in their first years a budget priority. Early investment in care and pruning that helps shape the tree properly will reap big rewards later in terms of the many benefits provided and reduced maintenance costs

(2) What is true for a city's gray infrastructure is true for its green infrastructure: deferred maintenance increases lifetime costs. Make sure that even during difficult times, trees are receiving basic care.[v]

An investment in urban forestry is an investment in our economy from the ground up. It's good for the environment, it's good for the health and well-being of the people of California, and it's good for the bottom line.

Sources for more information:

- Nature Within (University of Washington), Nature and Consumer Environments: http://www.naturewithin.info/consumer.html
- The Urban Ecosystems and Processes team (formerly the Center for Urban Forest Research) of the US Forest Service: http://www.fs.fed.us/psw/programs/uesd/uep/
- The Alliance for Community Trees research archive: http://actrees.org/site/resources/research/
- California Urban Forests Council: http://www.caufc.org/
- Invest From the Ground Up: http://investfromthegroundup.org
- The Urban Forest Management Plan Toolkit: http://www.ufmptoolkit.com/
- United Voices for Healthier Communities: http://www.unitedvoices.org/

References

[i] Donovan GH, Butry DT (2010) Trees in the city: valuing street trees in Portland, Oregon. Landscape and Urban Planning 94:77–83.

[ii] Reviewed in Joye Y, Willems K, Brengman M, Wolf K (2010) The effects of urban retail greenery on consumer experience: reviewing the evidence from a restorative perspective. Urban Forestry and Urban Greening 9: 57–64.

[iii] Simpson JR, McPherson EG (2007) San Francisco bay area state of the urban forest final report. Center for Urban Forest Research, USDA Forest Service, Davis, CA.

[iv] Templeton SR, Campbell W, Henry M, Lowdermilk J (2010) Impacts of Urban Forestry on California's Economy in 2009. Technical report to CalFIRE.

[v] The Urban Ecosystems and Processes team has published a series of community tree guides (http://www.fs.fed.us/psw/programs/uesd/uep/tree_guides.php) with great tips for tree planting and care.