

THE PLANNING POST



FEATURED TOPIC:

Tiny Forests With Big Benefits

The attached article from The New York Times discusses mini-forests, designed by plant ecologist Akira Miyawaki. His method creates fast-growing native forests. The benefits of the mini-forest include increasing habitat for plants and animals, improving climate change, and reconnecting people with nature.

UPCOMING MEETINGS:

County PC:

Feb 14th @ 8:30 am

City PC:

Feb 14th @ 4:00 pm

County BZA:

Feb 26th @ 7:00 pm

City BZA:

Feb 27th @ 6:30 pm

City of Columbus December Plan Commission Results

PUDF-2023-004: White River Dental – Approved

A request by White River Dental to revise a Final PUD plan to allow a 74 ft. by 20 ft. (1,480 square foot) accessory structure (solar charging station). The property is located at 2380 Merchants Mile, in the City of Columbus.

RZ-2023-004: Tyler Payton – Favorable Recommendation

A request by Tyler Payton to rezone 1.3 acres from I-3 (Industrial: Heavy) to CC (Commercial: Community). The property is located at 710 South Marr Road, in the City of Columbus.

RZ-2023-005: Rubicon Investment Group – Favorable Recommendation

A request by the Rubicon Investment Group to rezone 2.04 acres from CN (Commercial: Neighborhood) to CD (Commercial: Downtown). The properties are located at 1008, 1020, 1034 Washington Street and 921 Jackson Street, in the City of Columbus.

Bartholomew County December Plan Commission Results

No meeting due to a lack of agenda items.

PLANNING DEPARTMENT REPORTS:

Floodplain Management

This month the Floodplain Manager reviewed a proposal for a commercial solar facility spread out among several parcels on the east side of the city. The proposed development spans over 1900 acres and portions of the project are within the FEMA Floodway, 100-year floodplain, and 500-year floodplain. In addition, portions of the project along Brush Creek fall within an updated study area done by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) completed in 2018, which provides more detailed floodplain information.

While the Zoning Ordinance prohibits development and land altering activities in the floodway, development in the 100-year and 500-year floodplains are permitted if the development is protected from flood risk.

Upon reviewing the proposal, it was noted that the better IDNR data for Brush Creek was not utilized in site planning. As a result, some of the panels, inverters, and materials are located in the floodplain and would therefore need to be anchored, constructed with flood resistant materials, and all service facilities would need to be elevated above Flood Protection Grade (FPG). Since this elevation could be anywhere between 4 and 6 feet depending on the location, reviewing and working with the applicant to make changes to plans and perhaps remove all development from the floodplain entirely, may create a less at-risk development with as minimal disturbances to the natural floodplain as possible.

Development Review

This little building is getting an upgrade. You may have never noticed this building located at 1634 North Gladstone, just south of Columbus Regional Hospital (CRH). Built in 1947, according to the property record card, it once was a TV repair shop and Boyer Machine and Tool. Most recently it has been used for storage for CRH, but will now house a plumber's office. The new property owner was approved by the Board of Zoning Appeals in September 2023 for a Use Variance to allow for a contractor's office in the RS4 (Residential: Single Family 4) zoning district. The image to the right is the "before". Be on the lookout for the "after".



Transportation Planning

CAMPO and other Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) are required to maintain a Public Participation Plan that has been adopted by the Policy Board. The plan is updated every five years. CAMPO's plan was last updated in 2020 to allow flexibility in how participants attend meetings and other events. The MPO planning process cannot be effective without the involvement of residents of our community, who are affected by transportation decisions.

CAMPO's Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) has been involved an update of the plan, which has been the topic of its last two meetings. The CAC reviewed new requirements for the plan, and identified several reasons why people may not be able to attend events, including lack of transportation to get to the meeting, not feeling welcome or heard, not having access to information about the meeting, an inconvenient meeting time, and other factors. At the group's next meeting, scheduled for February 6 at 5:30 PM, the CAC will discuss possible solutions. The group meets at City Hall.

Long Range Planning

Planning staff has been busy working on a new overlay district that would encompass the "Front Door" of the City. The proposed overlay district would provide development standards and basic architectural guidance to ensure that the "Front Door" of the City continues to develop in a responsible fashion, building off of the architecture that is seen in the Columbus Crossing Planned Unit Development. Things such as building materials, building orientation, landscaping, screening, signage and architectural cohesiveness would be addressed. The overall intent is to enact the goals that were expressed as part of the Columbus Front Door Project. Staff anticipates introducing the proposed overlay at an upcoming Plan Commission meeting.



Cover of 1992 Plan



Example of Façade and Architectural Treatments



Example of Landscaping

JOKE OF THE MONTH: Q: Where do polar bears keep their money? A: In a snowbank.



CITY OF COLUMBUS - BARTHOLOMEW COUNTY PLANNING DEPARTMENT

City of Columbus - Bartholomew County - Edinburgh/Bartholomew/Columbus Joint District - 123 Washington Street, Columbus, IN 47201 - (812) 376-2550 - www.columbus.in.gov

Tiny Forests With Big Benefits

Cara Buckley

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Andrew Putnam, superintendent of urban forestry and landscapes for the city of Cambridge, Mass., in Danehy Park, near Harvard University, July 26, 2023. (Cassandra Klos/The New York Times)

The tiny forest lives atop an old landfill in the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Although it is still a baby, it's already acting quite a bit older than its actual age, which is just shy of 2.

Its aspens are growing at twice the speed normally expected, with fragrant sumac and tulip trees racing to catch up. It has absorbed stormwater without washing out, suppressed many weeds and stayed lush throughout last year's drought. The little forest managed all this because of its enriched soil and density, and despite its diminutive size: 1,400 native shrubs and saplings, thriving in an area roughly the size of a basketball court.

It is part of a sweeping movement that is transforming dusty highway shoulders, parking lots, schoolyards and junkyards worldwide. Tiny forests have been planted across Europe, in Africa, throughout Asia and in South America, Russia and the Middle East. India has hundreds, and Japan, where it all began, has thousands.

Now tiny forests are slowly but steadily appearing in the United States. In recent years, they've been planted alongside a corrections facility on the Yakama reservation in Washington state, in Los Angeles' Griffith Park and in Cambridge, where the forest is one of the first of its kind in the Northeast.

"It's just phenomenal," Andrew Putnam, superintendent of urban forestry and landscapes for the city of Cambridge, said on a recent visit to the forest, which was planted in fall 2021 in Danehy Park, a green space built atop the former city landfill. As dragonflies and white butterflies floated about, Putnam noted that within a few years, many of the now 14-foot saplings would be as tall as telephone poles and the forest would be self-sufficient.

Healthy woodlands absorb carbon dioxide, clean the air and provide for wildlife. But these tiny forests promise even more.

They can grow as quickly as 10 times the speed of conventional tree plantations, enabling them to support more birds, animals and insects and to sequester more carbon, while requiring no weeding or watering after the first three years, their creators said.

Perhaps more important for urban areas, tiny forests can help lower temperatures in places where pavement, buildings and concrete surfaces absorb and retain heat from the sun.

"This isn't just a simple tree-planting method," said Katherine Pakradouni, a native plant horticulturist who oversaw the forest planting in Griffith Park. "This is about a whole system of ecology that supports all manner of life, both above and below ground."

The Griffith Park forest occupies 1,000 square feet and has drawn all manner of insects, lizards, birds and ground squirrels, along with western toads that journeyed from the Los Angeles River, Pakradouni said. To get to the forest, the toads had to clamber up a concrete embankment, traverse a bike trail, venture down another dirt embankment and cross a horse trail.

"It has all the food they need to survive and reproduce, and the shelter they need as a refuge," Pakradouni said. "We need habitat refuges, and even a tiny one can, in a year, be life or death for an entire species."

Known variously as tiny forests, miniforests, pocket forests and, in the United Kingdom, "wee" forests, they trace their lineage to Japanese botanist and plant ecologist Akira Miyawaki, who in 2006 won the Blue Planet Prize, considered the environmental equivalent of a Nobel award, for his method of creating fast-growing native forests.

Miyawaki, who died in 2021 at the age of 93, developed his technique in the 1970s, after observing that thickets of indigenous trees around Japan's temples and shrines were healthier and more resilient than those in single-crop plantations or forests grown in the aftermath of logging. He wanted to protect old-growth forests and encourage the planting of native species, arguing that they provided vital resilience amid climate change while also reconnecting people with nature.

“The forest is the root of all life; it is the womb that revives our biological instincts, that deepens our intelligence and increases our sensitivity as human beings,” he wrote.

Miyawaki’s prescription involves intense soil restoration and planting many native flora close together. Multiple layers are sown — from shrub to canopy — in a dense arrangement of about three to five plantings per square meter. The plants compete for resources as they race toward the sun, while underground bacteria and fungal communities thrive. Where a natural forest could take at least a century to mature, Miyawaki forests take just a few decades, proponents say.

Crucially, the method requires that local residents do the planting, in order to forge connections with young woodlands. In Cambridge, where a second tiny forest, less than half the size of the first one, was planted in late 2022, Putnam said residents had embraced the small forest with fervor. A third forest is in the works, he said, and all three were planned and organized in conjunction with the nonprofit Biodiversity for a Livable Climate.

“This has, by far and away, gotten the most positive feedback from the public and residents than we’ve had for any project, and we do a lot,” Putnam said.

Still, there are skeptics. Because a Miyawaki forest requires intense site and soil preparation, and exact sourcing of many native plants, it can be expensive. The Danehy Park forest cost \$18,000 for the plants and soil amendments, Putnam said, while the pocket forest company, SUGi, covered the forest creators’ consulting fees of roughly \$9,500. By way of comparison, a Cambridge street tree costs \$1,800.

“A massive impact for a pretty small dollar amount in the grand scheme of the urban forestry program,” Putnam said.

Doug Tallamy, an American entomologist and author of “Nature’s Best Hope,” said that while he applauded efforts to restore degraded habitat, particularly in urban areas, many of the plants would eventually get crowded out and die. Better to plant fewer and save more, he said.

“I don’t want to throw a wet blanket on it; the concept is great, and we have to put the plants back in the ground,” Tallamy said. “But the ecological concept of a tiny forest packed with dozens of species doesn’t make any sense.”

Kazue Fujiwara, a longtime Miyawaki collaborator at Yokohama National University, said survival rates are between 85% and 90% in the first three years, and then, as the canopy grows, drop to 45% after 20 years, with dead trees falling and feeding the soil. The initial density is crucial to stimulating rapid growth, said Hannah Lewis, author of “Mini-Forest Revolution.” It quickly creates a canopy that shades out weeds and shelters the microclimate underneath from wind and direct sun, she said.

Throughout his life, Miyawaki planted forests at industrial sites globally, including at an automotive parts plant in southern Indiana. A turning point came when an engineer named Shubhendu Sharma took part in a Miyawaki planting in India. Enthralled, Sharma turned his own backyard into a miniforest, started a planting company called

Afforett and, in 2014, delivered a TED Talk that, along with a 2016 follow-up, ended up drawing millions of views.

Around the world, conservationists took notice.

In the Netherlands, Daan Bleichrodt, an environmental educator, plants tiny forests to bring nature closer to urban dwellers, especially city children. In 2015, he spearheaded the country's first Miyawaki forest, in a community north of Amsterdam, and has overseen the planting of nearly 200 forests since.

Four years later, Elise van Middeltem started SUGi, which has planted more than 160 pocket forests worldwide. The company's first forest was planted on a dumping ground alongside the Beirut River in Lebanon; others were sown later near a power plant in the country's most polluted city and in several playgrounds badly damaged by the 2020 blast at Beirut's port.

And Earthwatch Europe, an environmental nonprofit, has planted more than 200 forests, most of them the size of a tennis court, throughout the United Kingdom and mainland Europe in the past three years.

Although many of the forests are still very young, their creators say there have already been outsize benefits.

The woodlands in Lebanon have drawn lizards, geckos, birds and tons of insects and fungi, according to Adib Dada, an architect and environmentalist and the main forest creator there. In the West African country of Cameroon, where eight Miyawaki forests have been planted since 2019, there are improved groundwater conditions and higher water tables around the forest sites, according to Limbi Blessing Tata, who has led the reforestation there. Crabs and frogs have also returned, she said, along with birds that were thought to be extinct.

According to Bleichrodt, a 2021 university study of 11 Dutch miniforests found more than 1,100 types of plants and animals at the sites — kingfishers, foxes, hedgehogs, spider beetles, ants, earthworms and wood lice.

"A Miyawaki forest may be like a drop of rain falling into the ocean," Fujiwara wrote in an email, "but if Miyawaki forests regenerated urban deserts and degraded areas around the world, it will create a river."

"Doing nothing," she added "is the most pointless thing."

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