

**The Communities Committee and Urban Forestry**  
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**Abstract**

The Communities Committee arose from a multi-year collaborative process involving thousands of individuals and organizations nationwide and culminating in the convening of the Seventh American Forest Congress in Washington, DC, in February 1996. The Committee's mission is to focus attention on the interdependence between America's forests and the vitality of rural and urban communities and to promote policies and practices that build on that connection.

The four key principles of community forestry are stewardship; an open, transparent, and inclusive process; multiparty monitoring; and reinvestment in the land. Even within that broad context, however, it is not always easy to find common ground between and serve both rural and urban constituencies. Issues of concern to urban communities do not always seem similarly compelling to rural practitioners, and vice versa. But over time the Committee has found that the lessons learned from each can immeasurably benefit the other.

**Key Words:** community forestry, urban forestry, stewardship

The Communities Committee arose from a multi-year collaborative process involving thousands of individuals and organizations nationwide and culminating in the convening of the Seventh American Forest Congress (7AFC) in Washington, DC, in February 1996. The objective of the 7AFC was to develop a shared vision, a set of principles, and recommendations that...result in policies for our nation's forests that reflect the American people's vision and are ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible.

The Communities Committee was one of several committees formed as part of the 7AFC process. It had been hoped that the committees would continue functioning well after the congress adjourned, implementing 7AFC recommendations falling within their various areas of expertise – policy, education, research, etc. Within a year or two, however, all the other committees faded away. The Communities Committee, meanwhile, has remained active, aggressively advancing the 7AFC's objectives. A few years ago we achieved 501(c)(3) corporate status and, while having operated so far on an all-volunteer basis, we will soon be recruiting paid staff so that we can increase our level of activity.

The Committee's mission is to focus attention on the interdependence between America's forests and the vitality of rural and urban communities and to promote policies and practices that:

- Improve political and economic structures to enhance local community well-being and the long-term sustainability of forested ecosystems;
- Increase the stewardship role for local communities in the maintenance and restoration of ecosystem integrity and biodiversity;
- Ensure that ethnically and socially diverse members of urban and rural communities participate in decision making and sharing of the benefits of forests;
- Encourage and enable the innovation and use of collaborative processes, tools, and technologies; and
- Recognize the rights and responsibilities of diverse forest landowners.

The Committee has articulated the four key principles of community forestry as: stewardship; an open, transparent, and inclusive process; multiparty monitoring; and reinvestment in the land. **Stewardship** means people taking responsibility for caring for the nation's forests – whether as managers of private forestlands that they or their organizations own, or as users and trustees of public forests. For many of us that means re-establishing a connection with the land that may have been lost as we have become a more urbanized nation.

A **collaborative process** is increasingly recognized as necessary for public forest management, and has been congressionally or administratively mandated for use in national forest planning, the development and implementation of Community Wildfire Protection Plans, Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management stewardship contracting, and other programs. And on the private side as well, landowners are seeing the value of planning and management that extends across ownership boundaries.

***Multiparty monitoring*** engages interested agencies, organizations, and individuals in collecting data on and evaluating the effects and outcomes of forest management activities. It facilitates adaptive management and shared learning, and has been a valuable tool for building greater trust between communities and public land managers.

Our forests benefit us in so many ways – but all too often we have taken from the land without giving much back. Now there is a significant backlog of restoration and maintenance work waiting to be done, as well as a need to build the community capacity and infrastructure needed to accomplish that work. We need a strong national commitment to ***reinvestment*** in healthy, fully functioning forests. Finding the means, however, is not easy. In these days of strained state and federal budgets, government funding is sorely limited. Private funding makes up some of the difference, but community forestry is still a priority for only a limited number of corporate or foundation donors, with the Ford Foundation being a notable – and much appreciated – exception.

It is not always easy to serve both rural and urban constituencies. Issues of concern to urban communities do not always seem similarly compelling to rural practitioners, and vice versa. But we have found that the lessons learned from each can immeasurably benefit the other. To strengthen urban-rural linkages, the Communities Committee’s board of directors (with both rural and urban members) holds one of its twice-yearly meetings in a rural location, and the other in an urban setting. At least one day of each session is devoted to meeting with and listening to local community forestry groups and other interested individuals. Meeting-related field trips provide an “up close and personal” look at work being done on the ground, and afford more opportunities for the board and local forest practitioners to interact.

The Committee’s thrice-yearly newsletter strives to address issues and provide information of interest to both rural and urban readers. Our website ([www.communitiescommittee.org](http://www.communitiescommittee.org)) includes urban and rural case studies, information on what our various task groups (policy, research, communications, private lands, and urban activities) are working on; back issues of the newsletter, *Quick Guides*, proceedings from conferences, and much more.

The Committee partners with American Forests, the National Network of Forest Practitioners, the Pinchot Institute for Conservation, and the Society of American Foresters in hosting the annual “Week in Washington,” which brings practitioners to DC to learn how federal forest policy is made and administered, and to brief congressional staff, federal agencies, industry and environmental groups, and the press on current community forestry issues and activities. Last year, the Committee, SAF, the Western Governors’ Association, and other groups jointly produced a guide for communities to use in developing Community Wildfire Protection Plans, vital to urban, suburban, and rural communities alike.

In June 2005 the Committee hosted a first-of-its-kind conference on “Community-Owned Forests,” which brought together local government officials, conservation groups, forest practitioners, forest industry representatives, financial experts, and others to explore

issues, options, and experiences in community forest establishment, governance, management, and use. With many communities now confronting unanticipated large scale land use changes (often as a result of changes in ownership of nearby industrial forest lands), the conference provided positive options for meeting the challenge. Purchasing the lands being offered for sale and managing them for their long-term community benefits (including water and air quality, timber and non-timber forest products, recreation, wildlife habitat, community character, aesthetics, and cultural values) can be a win-win solution for all involved.

Strengthening the connections between urban and rural people and forests is a major goal of the Communities Committee. Thus, when I was asked to give a presentation at the annual meeting of the Montana Wilderness Association a couple of years ago, I chose to talk about urban forestry – particularly what was happening in the Rose Street neighborhood of Baltimore, Maryland. Rose Street has had many problems – among others, abandoned housing, high unemployment rates and a lack of job opportunities for young people, drug dealers operating openly on the streets, and a dearth of park and recreation facilities. When the neighborhood residents mobilized for action, one of the first things they did was plant street trees. Where derelict houses had been razed, the lots were reclaimed as pocket parks. Neighborhood gardens sprang up. And residents took to the streets – setting up outposts on high-traffic corners at night to discourage drug activity.

The effort was difficult and sometimes (when confronting drug dealers) hazardous, but the community persisted and made real progress. The trees have made a big impact on both attitude and environment. “I can tell the difference when I come into Rose Street,” one of the residents told us. “It smells nicer. I can hear and see birds that didn’t use to be here.”

Working for wilderness in Montana and reclaiming a Baltimore inner city neighborhood tree-by-tree. Two seemingly unrelated activities with actually a whole lot in common – important but threatened environments, people who care deeply and are willing to take personal action, results that will have positive benefits for generations to come. Some day I’d like to see the folks from Montana and Rose Street get together to share their stories and their accomplishments. While the landscapes in which they live may be very different, they are all truly dedicated stewards of their forests.