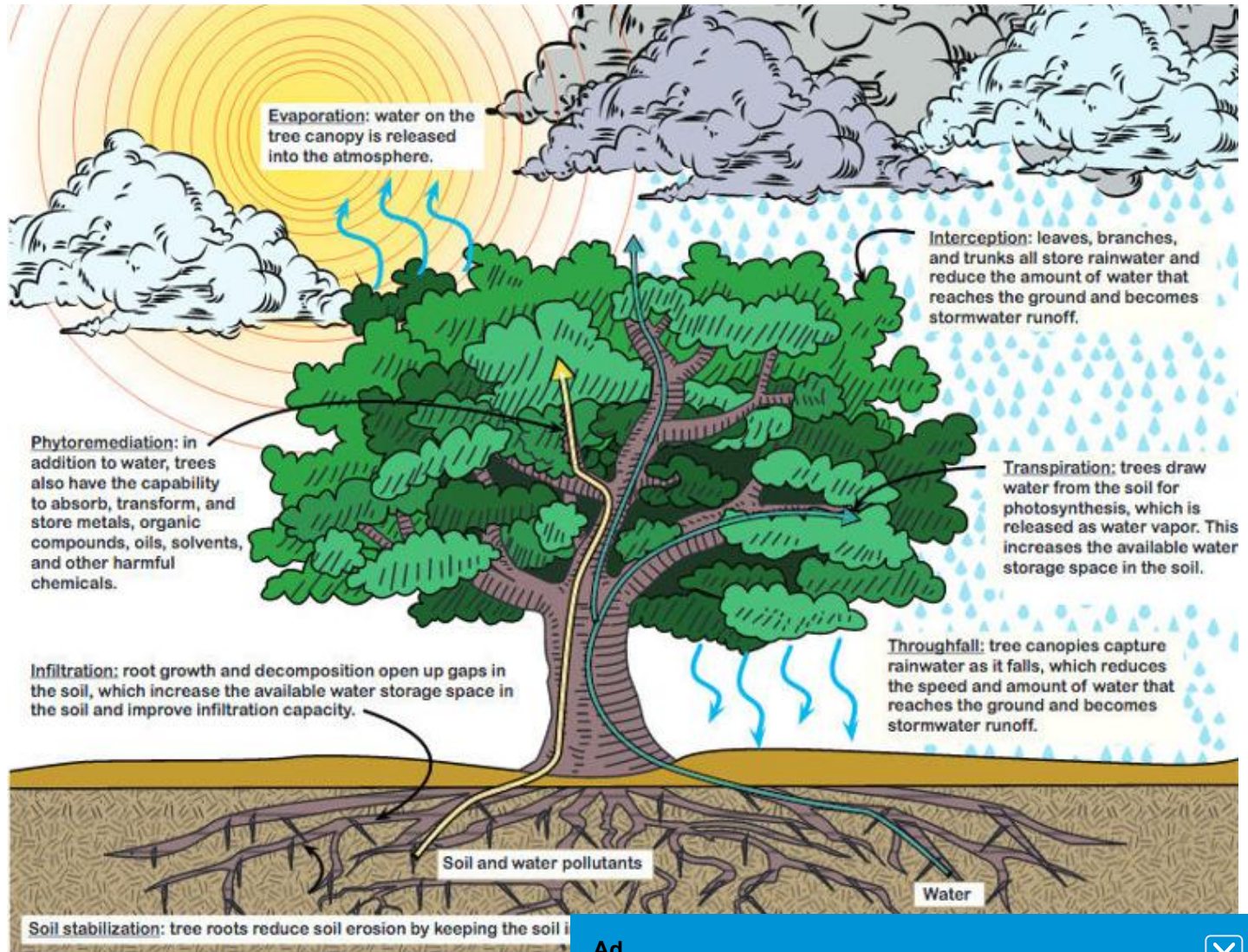


https://www.union-bulletin.com/news/local_governments/walla_walla/walla-walla-city-council-oks-tree-funding-plan/article_38e9b77a-d752-11e9-b20d-7798bb154dc7.html

Walla Walla City Council OKs tree funding plan

Dian Ver Valen 1 hr ago



Courtesy of city of Walla Walla

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13,000 trees — 7,052 of them lining city s

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City leaders say it needs a full-time arborist, plus money for specialized equipment and the occasional contractor to maintain the many tall and aging trees in its urban forest, which studies show can each intercept an average of 760 gallons of water annually and protect against erosion and flooding among other benefits.

With that in mind, Walla Walla City Council has agreed to tap into the city's stormwater utility fund — following a trend set by a number of Pacific Northwest communities — to pay for upkeep of street trees and other “green infrastructure.”

“The issue of the urban canopy is that it is in fact part of our stormwater process,” said Councilman Myron Huie in support of the Council's decision.

The city does have an employee now who spends 40% of his time working as an arborist. The plan with passage of the new ordinance is for that person to dedicate 100% of his hours toward maintenance of the city's trees, Parks & Recreation Director Andy Coleman told City Council.

As a bonus for property owners, Wednesday's action means staff will now prepare a code amendment for City Council to consider trees by abutting property owners, according to Bealey.

No increase in the stormwater rate, currently \$100 a year for most homeowners, is being proposed at this time, Bealey said. But the Council will look at all utility rates as part of the 2019 financial plan was set in 2015.

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“There’s no talk right now of raising rates, but while the stormwater fund can handle this for the next couple of years, it was never built into the stormwater fund to pay for this,” Bealey told the Union-Bulletin, explaining that although this fund had not been “healthy” before now, the fund is doing well today because staff have “chased a lot of grant money and been successful.”

The ordinance, which makes the city’s urban forest and green infrastructure including dozens of green basins and swales that work as bio-filters for stormwater throughout the city an official part of the stormwater system, passed 6-1 on Wednesday, with Councilman Jerry Cummins opposed.

“I’m voting against this because of the funding mechanism, not the issue,” Cummins said. “We have 21 employees in the Parks & Recreation Department, and all of them are being paid from the general fund.”

He said he would like to see the arborist position funded at 100% but not by using funds raised by stormwater utility fees. Walla Walla resident Bruce Johnson underscored Cummins’ concern in his comments to City Council on Wednesday night.

“I’m an advocate for trees,” Johnson said. “I believe pretty much everything that’s been said about urban forests.”

His question to City Council, however, was how the city would protect its taxpayers from the rising costs associated with maintaining these trees.

“There would be other ways to raise money to manage our urban forest than by just taking money from our rate-based utility,” Johnson said.

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Councilmen Tom Scribner and Huie argued that funneling money from rate-based enterprise funds, established as separate funds devoted to the operation of an enterprise activity such as maintaining the city's sewer system or water system, is appropriate for this use.

“More than a third of the general fund revenue comes from administrative fees and excise fees that the enterprise funds pay into the general fund,” Scribner said. “To say we should fund this position out of the general fund, really we are, it's just money coming from that enterprise fund as does a lot of money from enterprise funds into the general fund for various purposes.”

Huie agreed, saying: “I don't see any concern that we can't use a portion of those funds for stormwater use to make sure that those trees can in fact continue to do that which they have been doing all along. I think the idea of adding to our support staff for our urban canopy is important, and I don't see it as being a compromise to use enterprise funds for that application.”

According to staff reports, \$153,896 would be transferred from the stormwater fund to the park maintenance budget to support funds would be moved over annually, acc

Among several cities in the Pacific North urban forestry program in Vancouver, Wa management fees (97%). And the city of I

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(63%) supported by its stormwater utility fund, according to the technical memorandum prepared for the city of Walla Walla this spring by Seattle-based Herrera Environmental Consultants Inc.

At a June joint meeting of the Parks, Recreation and Urban Forestry Advisory Board and the Water-Wastewater Advisory Committee, both boards unanimously recommended a policy proposal be forwarded to City Council that would use stormwater funds to aid the urban forestry program, according to minutes from that meeting.



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