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East Providence plants trees and trains youth thanks to forest service - by Roberto DaSilva

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The city of East Providence understands the importance of a vibrant urban canopy. While urban forests are only 10% of Rhode Island's forested land (~36,817 acres), the majority of the state's residents live in cities like East Providence (RI Forest Action Plan, 2020, <https://dem.ri.gov>). Urban forests support physical and ecological systems but also enhance human health, mental well-being, social interactions, community identity, volunteerism, and engagement. However, healthy urban forests require continuous investment involving funding, planning, monitoring, management, stewardship, and community engagement. A survey of Rhode Island municipalities by the RI Infrastructure Bank showed that the three largest barriers to healthy urban forests included funding for maintenance, dedicated staff time, and funding for tree planting.

Luckily, the U.S. Forest Service provided the city with a \$750,000 Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) grant to support its Tree Equity Workforce and Education Program (TEWEP). In only one planting season, TEWEP has already funded the installation of over 50 trees, including 28 trees at Agnes B. Hennessey Elementary School, a school with next to no previous canopy in an underserved area of the city. The school serves 258 students, the majority of whom live in disadvantaged communities (DACs). Before the planting, the school's playground and hardtop areas had no shade, making outdoor play hazardous on warm days. Now, students are free to play outside during recess while learning the importance of urban forestry. An additional 450 tree plantings in DACs will be funded by the grant over the next four years with a specific focus on residential areas and schools that lack an adequate canopy.

In addition to tree planting, the IRA grant is funding the hiring of 25 paid youth urban forestry interns (five each summer until 2029). The first cohort of interns will begin working with the city later this month. All five of them are current or former students at East Providence High School with a special interest in science and the environment, and the hiring process for these positions was a collaborative effort between the school department, planning department, and DPW. East Providence is excited to give these young, aspiring urban forestry professionals the opportunity to learn hands-on about tree planting and tree care, species identification, soil science, GIS and remote sensing, and many other environmental topics through a combination of fieldwork and office experience.

Lastly, the USDA IRA grant provides funding for city staff to become more qualified in the field of forestry. The grant allows up to two city employees to attend courses in Tree Risk Assessment Qualification (TRAQ), a certification that allows arborists to accurately determine the risk of a tree falling and prescribe an appropriate treatment for the tree. Moreover, the grant allows two staff from the planning department to attend the Municipal Forestry Institute, an international conference on urban forestry and planning. The city thanks the forest service for the opportunity to expand its tree canopy and teach a new generation of urban foresters.

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