

## NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

# How the Newport Tree Conservancy pivoted to Tree Equity and built new funder relationships

### Background

Newport Tree Conservancy (NTC), a local nonprofit in Newport, R.I., has been working to revive the city's local tree canopy since 1987. The organization partners with the City of Newport and other local groups to shape municipal tree policy, provide residents with free trees, support tree maintenance and educate the public on their local forests. In 2017, NTC opened the "Heritage Tree Center" on the campus of Roger's High School, a teaching nursery that provides several hundred healthy native trees to residents every year. They've planted thousands of trees, established the state's first citywide arboretum and led Newport in qualifying as Rhode Island's second Tree City USA—an Arbor Day Foundation designation for community tree programs.

Despite their accomplishments, NTC recognized that their annual planting program could be more impactful by targeting communities where trees are needed most. In 2020, NTC participated in the development of the Rhode Island Tree Equity Score Analyzer (TESA) and was struck by the gap in Newport's Tree Equity. While staff and board members had long observed the absence of trees in poorer neighborhoods, Tree Equity Score made those gaps measurable. Newport Tree Conservancy responded by remodeling their 2022 planting program to focus on equity.

### Approach

Newport Tree Conservancy (NTC) sought to transform their 2022 planting program by focusing exclusively on Tree Equity. For years, NTC served residents who were already familiar with the program and lived in wealthier, greener neighborhoods. The organization did not follow up on the survival of the trees they provided. In order to make a real impact on Tree Equity, NTC decided to focus exclusively on Newport's Health Equity Zone (HEZ) district and "partner" with residents to reforest low-scoring communities.

Newport Tree Conservancy staff used Tree Equity Score Analyzer (TESA) to clarify and grow support for their new vision among their stakeholders.

As part of this project, the NTC completed an [impact certification](#) ↗. This project design tool evaluates and measures the human health, social equity and environmental impacts that each planting project has on the community. These impacts are linked to the [17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#) ↗.



This project was funded by the [National Association of State Foresters](#) ↗ and the USDA Forest Service's [2022 Urban Forest Resilience Grant](#) ↗ in partnership with the [Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management's Division of Agriculture and Forest Environment](#) ↗.





## NTC remodels their planting program

Newport, R.I., known for its wealth, has been a destination for some of the richest families in the United States—including the Vanderbilts, Astors, Wideners and Kennedys—who built summer mansions along the coast. Yet, the city remains vastly unequal. According to census data integrated into the Rhode Island [TESA](#)<sup>7</sup>, American Forests’ deep-dive mapping tool, around half of all households in Newport’s northern block groups live in poverty—earning less than 200% of the federal poverty level, or less than \$49,720 for a family of three. There are two to three times more residents of color living in these neighborhoods when compared to the city as a whole. Tree coverage is correspondingly low. According to the Rhode Island TESA, the block groups with the highest poverty rates have Tree Equity Scores

under 60 out of 100, and some have just 11% canopy coverage. For comparison, Newport has a citywide Tree Equity Score of 71, and several of the wealthier block groups have Tree Equity Scores above 85.

Newport Tree Conservancy responded by remodeling their 2022 planting program to focus on equity. Instead of giving away free trees on a first-come-first-served basis, NTC focused on Newport’s Health Equity Zone (HEZ) district, an area targeted by the state health department for improved health outcomes, where Tree Equity Scores are the lowest in the state. “We have a big opportunity to improve tree coverage in areas that need it most,” says Robert Currier, an NTC board member.

### CHALLENGE

Plant 310 trees in the HEZ district of Newport’s North End, which has the city’s highest rate of poverty and racial diversity, and contains neighborhoods with some of the lowest Tree Equity Scores. Prior to 2022, NTC had not worked directly in these areas, where 80% of the available planting space is residential. The organization needs buy-in from residents, who are generally not aware of NTC’s programs, do not understand the full range of benefits from trees, and express intimidation about planting and maintenance.



GROUNDWORK RHODE ISLAND

### ACHIEVEMENT

**>300**

**trees planted**

including 100 trees planted in Miantonomi Park, the sole park in a block group with a Tree Equity Score of 57

**177**

**residential plantings**

including 95 residential plantings in Newport’s Health Equity Zone

**+100%**

**plantings from 2021-2022**

in Newport’s Health Equity Zone

# NTC's approach

“Tree Equity Score Analyzer confirmed our instincts—that we needed to prioritize the HEZ district because that’s where the lowest Tree Equity Scores are.”

Natasha Harrison  
Executive Director of NTC

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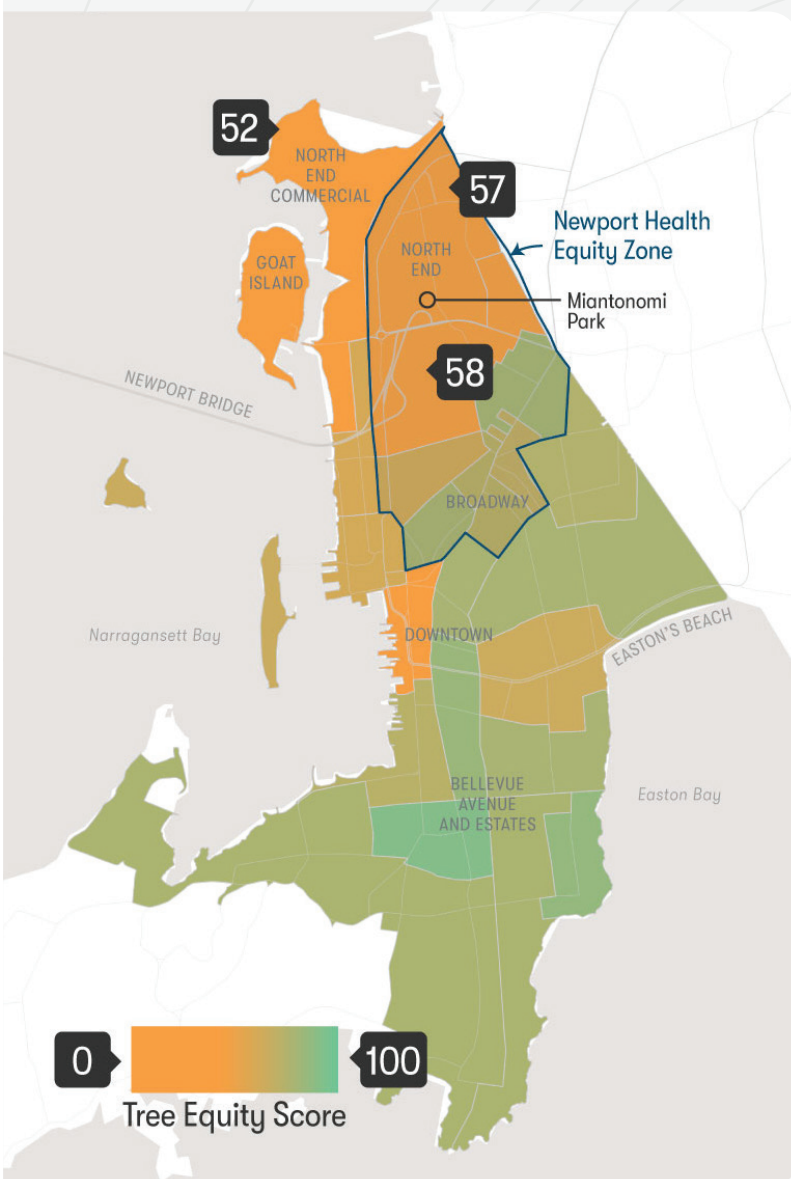
## The board

The organization needed to narrow their geographical scope to areas of greatest need. As fellow residents, staff and board members had long observed a distinct lack of trees in the North End. By investigating their hunch using TESA, staff could explain their precise focus area to the board. “The tool gave us the data we needed,” says Natasha Harrison, executive director of NTC. “Tree Equity Score Analyzer confirmed our instincts—that we needed to prioritize the HEZ district because that’s where the lowest Tree Equity Scores are. We could move forward with confidence because our plan was no longer subjective.”

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## Funders

Newport Tree Conservancy needed to grow their budget to accommodate increased staff hours required for community outreach and provide tree planting, care and maintenance services. They used TESA to visually demonstrate the relationship between trees and race, economics, and health in their grant proposal to the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management Division of Forest Environment Urban & Community Forestry Program as part of the USDA State Urban Forest Resilience Grant Initiative. This is a new approach that NTC is applying to historical funders who are still learning about Tree Equity. “We needed to communicate that this program is not about giving away a free tree,” says Harrison. “Tree Equity Score Analyzer helped us communicate how our program can elevate everyone’s access to the benefits of trees.”





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## Health Equity Zone residents

The organization made a significant effort to build relationships directly with the residents. They introduced their program through direct mailings and flyers, which referenced Tree Equity Scores to explain how planting benefits the community for generations. They sent staff arborists onsite to assist applicants in selecting their tree and identifying the best planting locations. These visits gave staff an opportunity to talk to residents about Tree Equity and the health benefits of trees and answer questions. Staff asked applicants to spread the word and encourage neighbors to apply. They built inroads with curious residents. “People might not have been looking for a tree program, but they’re starting to see trees going into the ground,” says Joe Verstandig, Living Collections manager at NTC. “They ask questions and we can talk to them about Tree Equity and the impact for their community.”



NEWPORT TREE CONSERVANCY

“There’s a lot of conversations these days about addressing the historical inequity in Newport—redoing infrastructure, improving transportation. Our work in Tree Equity focuses our mission and helps build momentum because it fits in with the ways Newport is trying to change.”

**Natasha Harrison**

*Executive Director of NTC*



## Citywide residents and partners

In previous years, nearly all trees NTC provided went to properties outside of the HEZ district. In 2022, applicants from Newport HEZ received first priority. Applicants who had grown accustomed to receiving an annual tree could no longer expect one. The organization needed a succinct way to explain why the program was changing so they did not get bogged down with additional questions. They created online resources on the refined direction of their program—including TESA maps and a detailed description of their plans to address tree inequity—to help inform applicants from outside the HEZ. They referenced Tree Equity and health data to communicate the impact of planting to community partners, including the Providence Housing Authority, a major landlord in the target area. “The North End is really cut off and distinct from the South,” says Harrison. “There’s a lot of conversations these days about addressing the historical inequity in Newport—redoing infrastructure, improving transportation. Our work in Tree Equity focuses our mission and helps build momentum because it fits in with the ways Newport is trying to change.”

# Ongoing results

## Lessons learned

Newport Tree Conservancy says many of the HEZ residents they met in 2022 have expressed interest in applying for trees in 2023. To grow this success, NTC plans to ramp up their community engagement and spend more time talking directly to residents on-the-ground through community events and door-to-door outreach. They also plan to grow the impact of plantings by using TESA to identify streets within the HEZ district where Tree Equity Scores need the most improvement. “We’re in the right neighborhoods,” says Harrison. “Now we need to get down to specific streets where Tree Equity can be dramatically improved and hone our communication strategy to engage those residents.”

## New funders

Newport Tree Conservancy won a \$35,000 “Citizens in Action” grant from Citizens Bank to continue their planting work in the North End in 2023. Their proposal builds on the 2022 planting program, highlighting the opportunity to address racial and economic disparities through Tree Equity.



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