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EDITOR'S PICK

Pruned: feds kill Billings' \$1M tree grant, Phillips 66 fills the gap

Lillian Palmer

Jun 16, 2025

Funding for urban trees in Billings is tight, especially now that the city's hard won \$1 million urban forestry grant for disadvantaged areas was terminated by the federal government in April.

The already awarded grant, which would have been used to beautify underserved portions of Billings, was withdrawn by the Trump administration due to its supposed association with diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives.

While the city plans to appeal the cancellation, Patrick Plantenberg, chair of the Montana Urban and Community Forestry Association (MUCFA) is urging area corporations to step up and fill in that funding gap. Phillips 66 Billings Refinery, southeast of downtown, did so for the South Side.



Scott Meyers, Patrick Plantenberg, Mary Mistek, and Janet Hardy are pictured beside newly planted trees and shrubs outside of the Phillips 66 Refinery on 1st Avenue South in Billings.

AMY LYNN NELSON, Billings Gazette

“Without that (grant) money right now, we will see very few projects being done across the country because communities, especially smaller communities, are strapped for maintaining their city, water, sewer, streets and garbage, and they don’t have money left over for trees,” said Plantenberg.

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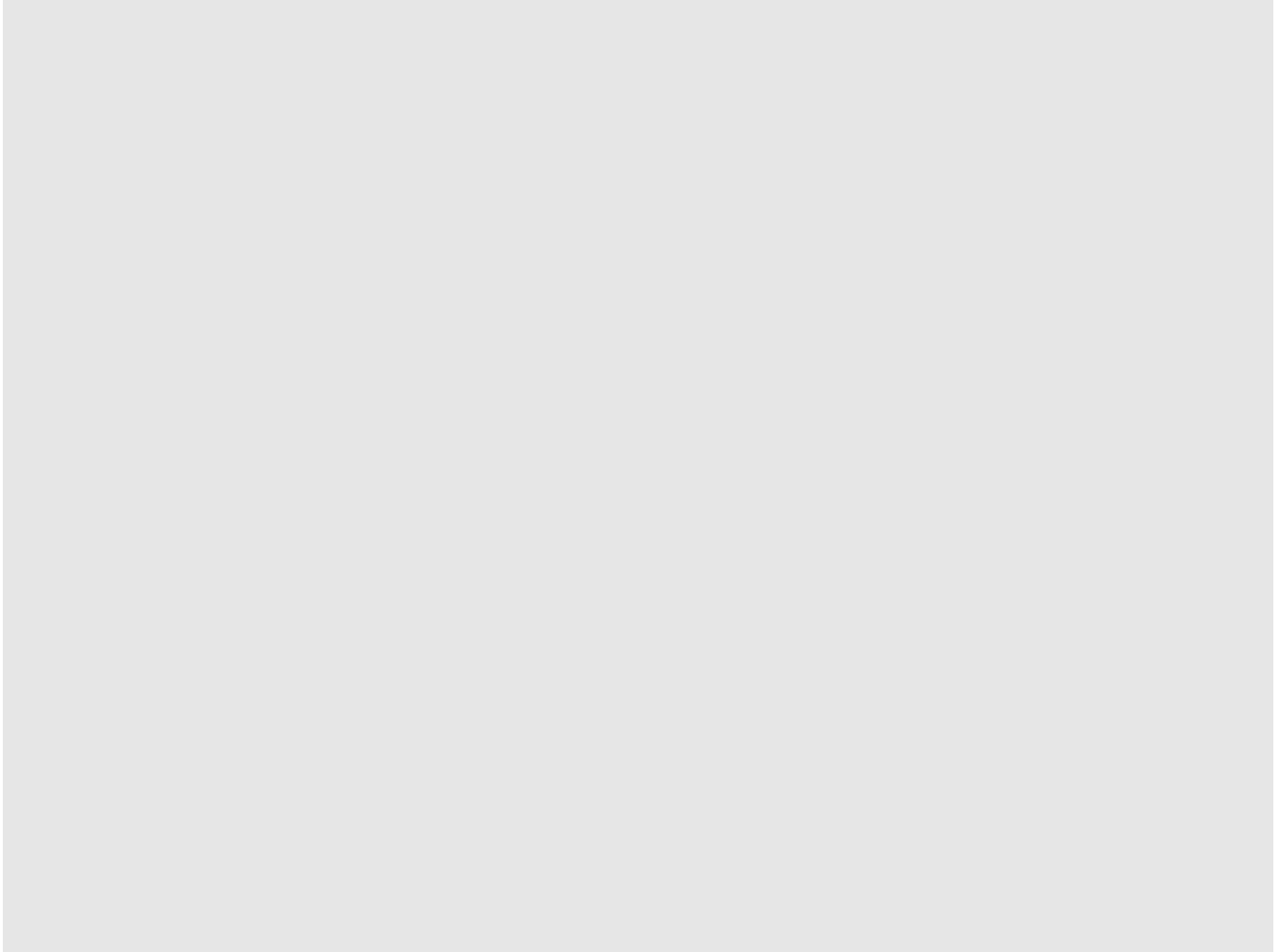
With federal funds for urban forestry projects frozen, Plantenberg said cities like Billings are more reliant on private businesses and philanthropic organizations to help build and nurture green spaces in urban jungles.

In the fall of 2024, the Phillips 66 Billings Refinery completed a beautification project bordering the refinery’s property on First Avenue South — a project that was suggested to them by the refinery’s Citizens Advisory Committee.

The CAC was established in 1990 to foster open communication and understanding between the needs of the community and the role of the refinery. Today, the CAC is made up of 20 representatives from the refinery’s South Side community, including elected officials, a representative for the South Park Senior Center, reps from the South Side Task Force, a Billings Fire Department rep, and more.

“They really go out of the way to get a nice cross section of the community ... I am very proud to see businesses like Phillips 66 show an interest — actually listen and invest into our community — and they do it in a way that I think is genuine and sincere,” said Mike Yakawich, CAC member, state senator, and former city councilman.

“Leadership asks CAC for suggestions; it’s not just a one-way street. They have so much money that they donate. CAC will suggest where to donate it, the trees were part of that.”



Newly planted trees and shrubs are pictured outside of the Phillips 66 Refinery on 1st Avenue South in Billings.
AMY LYNN NELSON, Billings Gazette

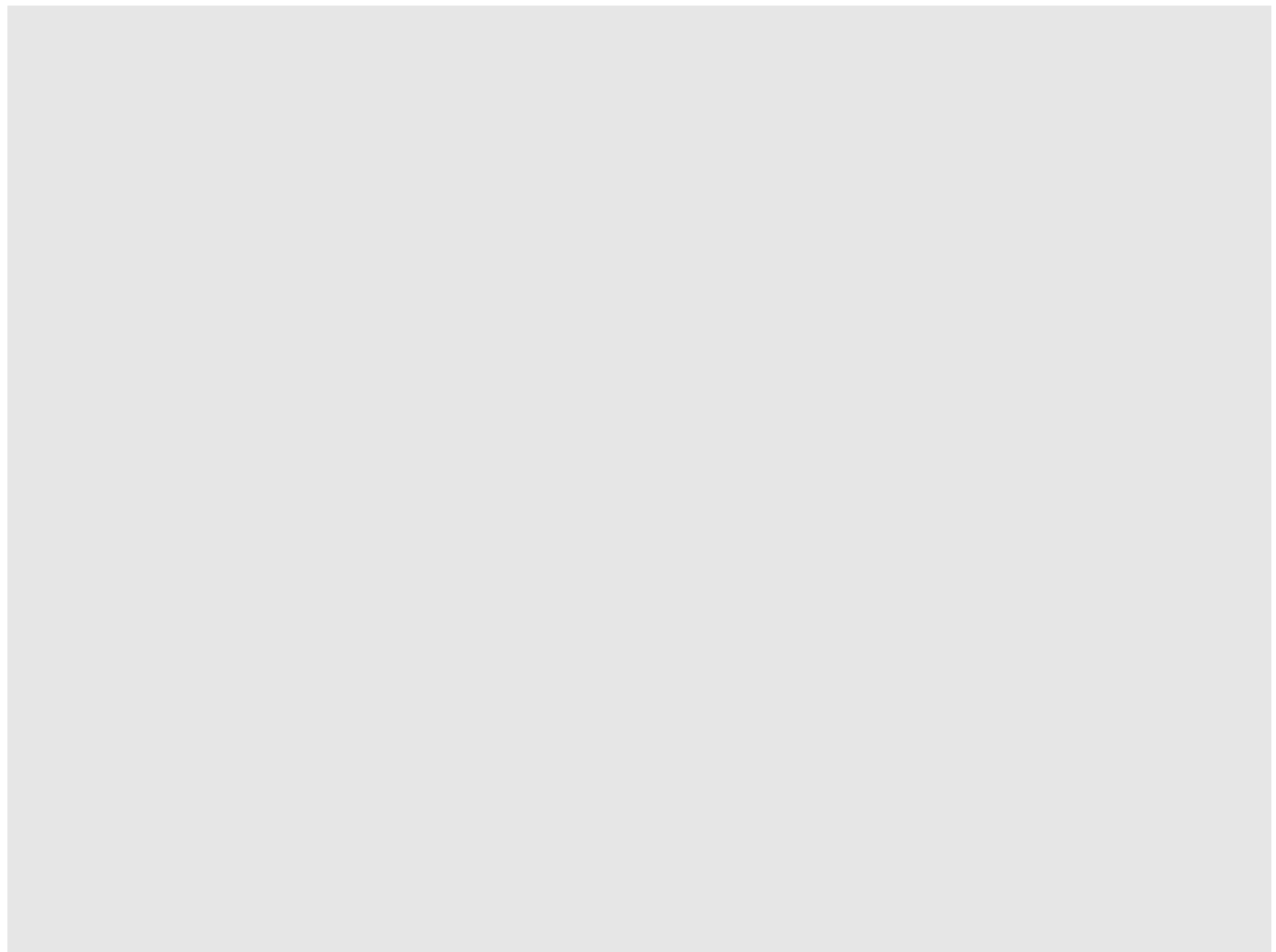
The project became a collaborative effort. The refinery provided labor for landscaping, urban forestry experts guided the work and an internal Phillips 66 grant of \$50,000 funded the project.

The new landscaping, trees and greenery on First Avenue South and 21st Street isn’t the refinery’s first tree-planting project either. They are making their way down the road. A row of trees and greenery seen up the street, on First Avenue South and 24th Street, was planted by the refinery previously. The company also adopted a mile and a half of Billings’ Black Otter Trail and now regularly maintains it as well.

“We’re trying to help out Billings Park and Rec. We know there’s a funding issue for trail maintenance and clean up. We were actually the first to jump on board with adopt-a-trail ... The sustainability piece of it is big for us,” said Phillips 66 spokesperson Janet Hardy. “But in addition, between this refinery and the one down the road, we have about 400 employees that work here — this is our community too. So, it’s great for us to be able to play a role in helping beautify this area.”

Billings’ former city forester and author of the city’s now-rescinded grant Steve McConnell is also glad a corporation is stepping up.

“They’re a crucial link, now,” McConnell said. “If they want to have a stable workforce, happy employees... People want to live where they have a high quality of life and urban forests help with that. People want to live where they feel happy, trees make us feel calmer and happier.”



Newly planted trees and shrubs are pictured outside of the Phillips 66 Refinery on 1st Avenue South in Billings.

AMY LYNN NELSON, Billings Gazette

When a town has a well-organized urban forestry department, McConnell said people perceive the town as being more comfortable and logical. He said a lot of data shows that crime is less, traffic goes slower and people are calmer in cities with trees.

“Trees are funny, people don’t notice them until they’re gone,” McConnell said.

“Quality of life in a town is measured by its tree canopy. People enjoy being in a well-tree’d community.”

McConnell said when the opportunity came about to apply for the \$1 million Inflation Reduction Act grant to plant trees in underserved communities he knew, “Billings was a really good fit for it.”

“Our city just fit perfectly. There’s a big area that is has poor quality and fewer trees than others. That neighborhood just happened to be where people are poorer and had a larger ethnic diversity; the kind of area they were wanting for the grant. It was the perfect opportunity to make a big change,” he said.

The screening process to qualify for the grant was lengthy and prerequisites included "a lack of trees, ethnic diversity and low-income levels." He envisioned seeing green from city hall to the Metra. The entirety of the East Billing Urban Renewal District qualified for the grant as well as the South Park area, Terry Park area, and the North Park area.

“They were looking for low-income neighborhoods to plant trees in. The biggest irony is, the income and ethnic diversity issues were both considered DEI, and that is why they pulled the grant,” said McConnell. “It’s sad that they pulled it. If you took out those criteria and just used where trees were needed, you’d have the same area.”

The United States Department of Agriculture’s termination letter to the City of Billings, for the Urban Forestry Grant For Disadvantaged Areas, stated DEI as the reason of cancellation.

“The award specified above provides funding for programs that promote or take part in DEI initiatives or other initiatives that unlawfully discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or another protected characteristic; that violate either the letter or purpose of Federal civil rights laws; that conflict with the Department’s policies and priorities; that are not free from fraud, abuse, or duplication; or that otherwise fail to serve the best interests of the United States. The award is therefore inconsistent with, and no longer effectuates, Department priorities,” stated the termination letter.

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Forest
Service

Region 1
Northern Region
PO Box 7669
Missoula, MT 59807

Region 4
Intermountain Region
324 25th Street, Suite 5301
Ogden, UT 84401

File Code: 1580

Date: April 22, 2025

City of Billings
210 N 27th ST
Billings, Montana 59101-1938

Re: Grant Number 24-DG-11010013-002

Title: Inflation Reduction Act Urban and Community Forestry Billings Urban Forestry Grant for Disadvantaged Areas

Dear City of Billings,

This letter provides notice that the United States Department of Agriculture is terminating your federal award, 24-DG-11010013-002 Inflation Reduction Act Urban and Community Forestry Billings Urban Forestry Grant for Disadvantaged Areas, in accordance with the terms and conditions of your award, which include applicable regulations relating to termination. *See* 2 C.F.R. §§ 200.340-343.

It is a priority of the Department of Agriculture to eliminate discrimination in all forms throughout the United States. The Secretary of Agriculture has determined, per the Department's obligations to the Constitution and laws of the United States, that priority includes ensuring that the Department's awards do not support programs or organizations that promote or take part in diversity, equity, and inclusion ("DEI") initiatives or any other initiatives that discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or another protected characteristic. Such DEI policies and practices can violate both the letter and purpose of Federal civil rights laws and conflict with the Department's policy of maximizing and promoting American agriculture, ensuring a safe, nutritious and secure food supply, enhancing rural prosperity, and protecting our National Forests. In addition to complying with the letter and spirit of the civil rights laws, it is vital that the Department assess whether all awards are free from fraud, abuse, and duplication, as well as to assess whether current awards are in the best interests of the United States.

Termination. The award specified above provides funding for programs that promote or take part in DEI initiatives or other initiatives that unlawfully discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or another protected characteristic; that violate either the letter or purpose of Federal civil rights laws; that conflict with the Department's policies and priorities; that are not free from fraud, abuse, or duplication; or that otherwise fail to serve the best interests of the United States. The award is therefore inconsistent with, and no longer effectuates, Department priorities. *See* 2 C.F.R. § 200.340(a)(4). Pursuant to, among other authorities, 2 C.F.R. §§ 200.339-343, which are applicable to your award, the Department hereby terminates award No. 24-DG-11010013-002 in its entirety effective April 22, 2025.

Closure. You must submit all final reports and a final payment request no later than 120 calendar days after the date of this notice. You will be reimbursed for costs incurred up to the date of this notice that are determined to be consistent with 2 C.F.R. § 200.343, *Effects of suspension or termination*. Any open balance remaining 120 days after the date of this notice will be unavailable for payment.

Grant termination letter to City of Billings, from the USDA. Courtesy of USDA

McConnell said the city is in the process of appealing the grant termination and is drafting a new letter applying for the grant, in a way that explains the basis and need for the project without using “triggering language.”

“I hope they’re successful and am thrilled that they are trying,” McConnell said. “The City of Billings is working through a lot of challenging circumstances ... This is important so I am pleased they are giving it their best shot.”

By Lillian Palmer

Business and Health Reporter
