

HOLYOKE/NORTHAMPTON

BRANCHING OUT



STAFF PHOTOS/CAROL LOLLIS

Hailey Prive and Veronica Kozak, students at Holyoke Community College, measure the length of the pit a tree is planted in on Lyman Street in Holyoke. The students are participating in a long-term data collection project with Smith College students on tree health and urban settings.

Smith, Holyoke Community College students collaborate on forestry project

By **SOPHIE HAUCK**
For the Gazette

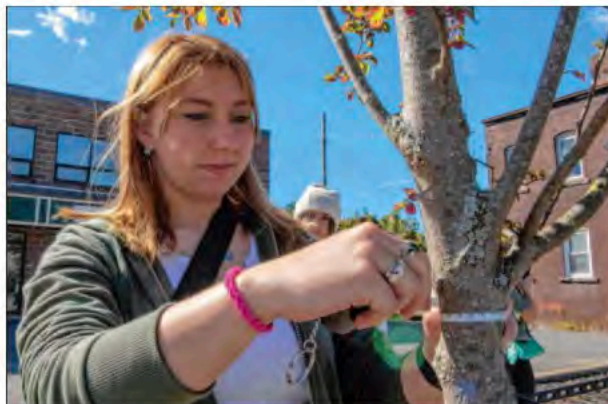
HOLYOKE — Can downtown Holyoke support a thriving forest ecosystem?

Students at Holyoke Community College and Smith College are teaming up to answer that question, tracking the growth of 94 trees in the Flats, Churchill and downtown neighborhoods that the city recently planted as part of its Urban Forest Equity Plan.

“We really wanted to understand the state of Holyoke’s urban forest canopy, do community outreach and find out what people thought about

trees,” said Holyoke’s Conservation & Sustainability Director Yoni Glogower, who launched the plan in July 2021 in hopes of planting trees in parts of Holyoke that historically had none. “Training the next generation of land stewards and decision makers was a great way to apply some of the findings and lingering questions from that plan that we had.”

Thirty three HCC and Smith students are partnering with Glogower to measure the development of dozens of trees in downtown Holyoke and de-



Hailey Privea, a student at Holyoke Community College, measures the diameter of a tree planted in a pit on Lyman Street in Holyoke.

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termine whether their roots have enough room to grow, as part of a class project HCC professor Sage Franetovich and Smith professor Jess Gersony established last year.

Gersony proposed the collaboration to Franetovich after she learned about Glogower's work in Holyoke, which she said brings together plant science and social justice — an intersection many of her students are interested in studying.

Planting trees in residential communities improves people's quality of life, the Forest Equity Plan says, but many low-income, urban neighborhoods have fewer trees than suburban and rural areas. Only 12% of land in the four neighborhoods the Forest Equity Plan focuses on — Churchill, Downtown, South Holyoke and the Flats — is covered by tree canopy on average, according to the 2020 Holyoke Impervious Surfaces Mitigation Plan.

A growing movement of foresters want to expand tree canopies into the city to ensure people of all backgrounds experience the benefits that trees provide, such as their ability to reduce stormwater runoff and offer shade that eases high temperatures.

"We know that summers are getting hotter, and in cities that have few trees, they're getting disproportionately hotter," Franetovich said. "The more trees we have, the more canopy cover there is and the less heat will radiate up off the pavement."

Barbara Ann Santiago is a student in Franetovich's class



STAFF PHOTO/CAROL LOLLIS

Smith College biology professor Jess Gersony, and Sage Franetovich, a botany professor at Holyoke Community College, meet on a recent morning with Yoni Glogower, the director of conservation and sustainability for the city of Holyoke. The students are engaged in a long-term data collection project on tree health and urban settings.

and grew up on Elm Street, one of the streets where the city recently planted trees. She recalled playing on the pavement or in nearby sandpits during her childhood, but without many trees to shade the street against the sun, every summer was "so hot."

"To come back now — five years later because I moved out — and see the trees that were planted here, it's just an amazing thing," Santiago said. "I want this for Holyoke."

Seeing few trees in downtown Holyoke compared to the large tree canopy that covers Smith's campus surprised some of Gersony's students.

"You are immediately struck by the ratio of street

trees," said Chlo Gold, a junior enrolled in Gersony's class. "This is not how we're meant to live."

Franetovich and Gersony's students have yet to meet in person, but the professors say they hope to continue collaborating as the trees mature, identifying new ways to integrate their classes. Depending on what data their students collect, Gersony said this project could feed into an academic publication, noting that "a lot of communities have the same challenges and questions" about planting trees in an urban environment.

Glogower may have found some of the answers, thanks to a grant from the Mas-

sachusetts Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness program that funded the development of his Urban Forest Equity Plan. The Department of Conservation & Recreation's Greening the Gateway Cities Program then planted all the trees at no cost to the city. DCR even continues to water the trees for two years until their roots get established.

As far as Gersony is concerned, the trees will be the gift that keeps giving in Holyoke.

"These trees are providing a lot of services," said Gersony, after meeting with the HCC cohort alongside Franetovich and Glogower. "We're all serving each other."