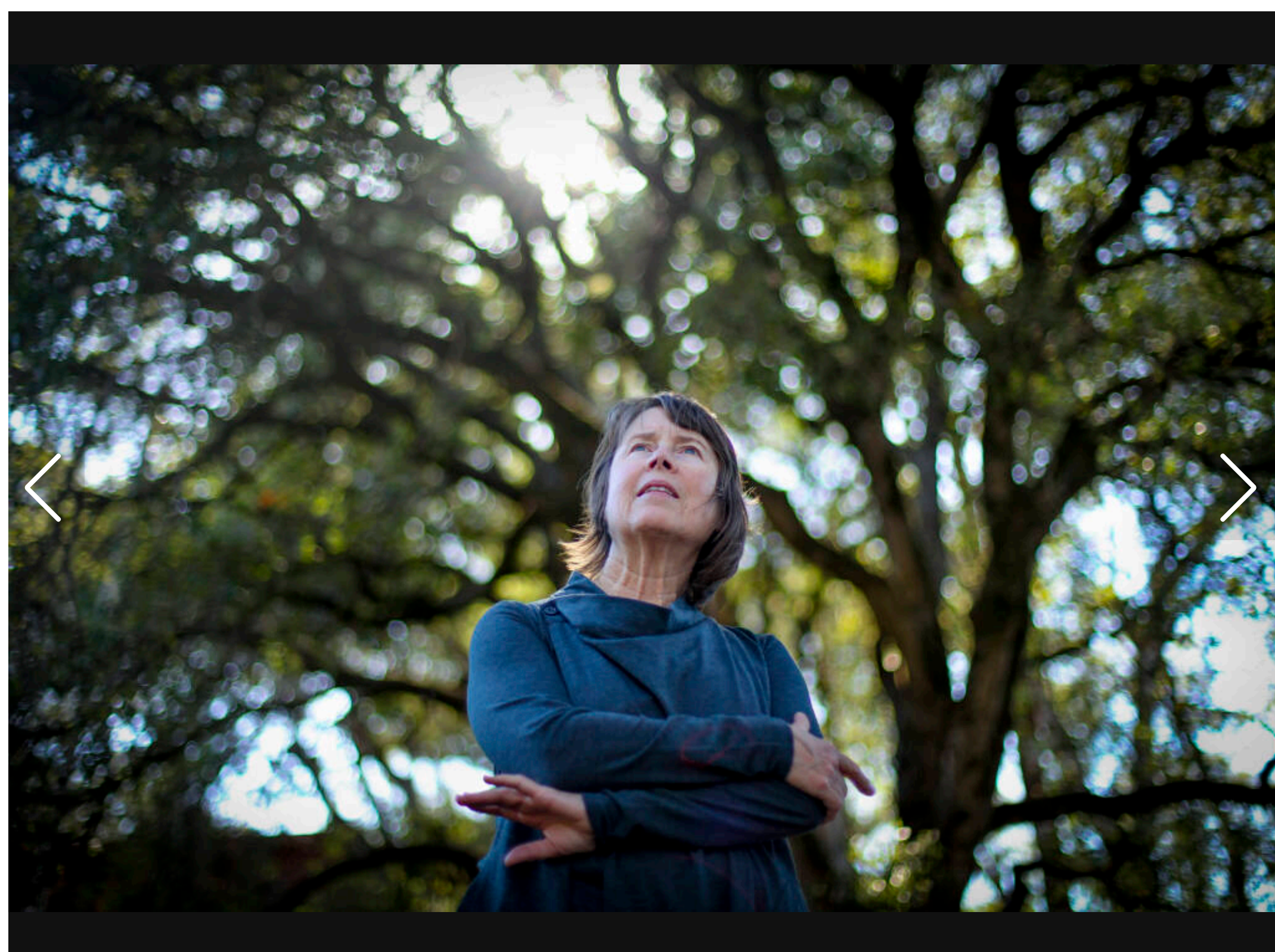




Petaluma nonprofit 'Releaf' plans to increase city's tree population



SLIDE 1 OF 7
Petaluma ReLeaf founder Wendy Jacobs, pictured here Tuesday, Oct. 12, 2021, helped grow the organization from a conversation about planting more native trees in the community to a nonprofit with goals that address biodiversity and climate change. (CRISSY PASCUAL/ARGUS-COURIER STAFF).

AMELIA PARREIRA
ARGUS-COURIER STAFF
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Aiming to fight climate change, cool neighborhoods and increase the city's overall shade canopy, a new Petaluma plant advocacy group is on a quest to plant 10,000 trees throughout the city.

The local nonprofit ReLeaf Petaluma presented its "Ten Thousand Trees" plan to the city's Tree Advisory Committee last month, and must still seek approval from the Petaluma City Council.

As designed, the program would allow ReLeaf to work with city officials and the Parks and Recreation department to plant about 6,000 native trees dispersed between local parks, schools, churches and hospital properties, and another 4,000 in residential areas.

The project, which would boost Petaluma's tree canopy by 10%, is meant to help slow the effects of climate change and reduce Petaluma's carbon footprint, ReLeaf founder Wendy Jacobs said.

"Not only do we not have the shade trees right now, but we have Highway 101 slashing through the center of our town, which brings more heat and pollution and noise," Jacobs said. "And trees will mitigate a lot of that."

Less than one-quarter of Petaluma neighborhoods are shaded by trees, according to a 2018 U.S. Department of Agriculture urban tree canopy mapping survey.

Santa Rosa ranges from 15% to 86%, and Sonoma has between 25% and 41% coverage, according to the same study.

Jacobs said Petaluma has about 100,000 trees throughout the city, and that planting an additional 10,000 would bring the canopy rate to the 25-35% range. She said that the plan would incorporate mostly native oak trees, which are preferred because they are accustomed to the Petaluma climate and are more drought resistant.

"By focusing our efforts on native trees, we're getting that added bonus of preserving the biodiversity in our region," Jacobs said, adding that oaks are high-scoring in carbon sequestration, as they soak up toxins in the air and from rain water runoff.

Bringing thousands of new trees to the city comes with a price tag, with each tree planted in city-owned parks costing more than \$100. Others may be donated. Point Blue Conservation Science recently contributed 20 oak saplings to a separate planting project for ReLeaf, Jacobs said.

Much of the overall cost, Jacobs added, will come from maintaining the trees once they are planted. She said Petaluma would need a small Urban Forestry Department to maintain the trees, an estimated cost of \$350,000 per year.

John Shribbs, chair of the Tree Advisory Committee and member of the Petaluma Wetlands Alliance, said the project will mainly rely on grant funding, which ReLeaf is working to lock down from multiple different sources. The group is currently awaiting a possible million-dollar grant from the "Cool Cities" campaign, presented by the Sierra Club.

Shribbs said plan leaders will seek \$250,000 grant from Cal Fire for open forestry management in Petaluma.

"If we can tap into all this new funding from the state and federal government, we should be able to have enough funds to actually plant the 10,000 trees on somebody else's dime," Shribbs said. "That would be great."

Jacobs said the group may need to look into requesting funds from local businesses and residents if the grants don't come through.

"We're going to have to diversify sources of funding," Jacobs said.

Shribbs said each tree planted could bring thousands of dollars of energy savings, as a mature tree's shade contributes cooling during the warmer months.

Group leaders acknowledge the ongoing drought could be a major obstacle to the plan's success, as a substantial amount of water is needed to start new trees.

"Hopefully we have some rains coming (so we can get) them watered enough...to have deep roots," Shribbs said. "But if we do it right, within five years we can probably get most of those planted."

Once the trees are planted and thriving, they can have up to a 100-year life cycle, Shribbs said. In that time, he said, they will not only contribute to environmental health, but can also aid in emotional and mental health for nearby residents.

Less exposure to trees and other natural aspects of the outside world can even lead to what is known as nature deficit disorder, a behavioral disorder associated with the lack of outdoor time and which mostly results from increased screen and technology use, especially in younger generations.

"Nature deficit (disorder) has to be fought," Shribbs said. "Living near a forested area, being able to go to that, is a calming psychological benefit."

Jacobs said the next step is getting a resolution passed by the City Council supporting the plan. Then the next would be to get more residents on board, with ReLeaf planning educational efforts to demonstrate the benefits of an expanded Petaluma tree canopy.

"We really think the trees will start selling themselves," Jacobs said.

Amelia Parreira is a staff writer for the Argus-Courier. She can be reached at amelia.parreira@arguscourier.com or 707-521-5208.

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