
PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT

DATE: April 18, 2017
TO: Culver City Residents and Community
FROM: Charles D. Herbertson, Public Works Director/City Engineer
SUBJECT: Tree Removals

Dear Residents:

Trees can be removed for several reasons:

- 1.) **Safety concerns** – it occasionally comes to our attention that a tree is diseased or damaged in some way as to create an unsafe condition. When this occurs, the City's Urban Forester will evaluate the tree to see if there is any way to mitigate the problem. Sometimes this is not possible and the tree must be removed to protect public safety.
- 2.) **Sidewalk Repairs** – occasionally it is necessary for the City to remove trees to allow for proper repair to damage sidewalks in order to return sidewalks to a safe condition compliant with federal accessibility standards. Again, the City's Urban Forester will look at each case carefully and recommend removal only when in his judgement there is no other alternative. This most often occurs when extensive root cutting is required in order to repair the sidewalk. When in the judgement of the City's Urban Forester the requirement to remove roots is so extensive as to destabilize the tree or kill it, the tree is removed.
- 3.) **Private construction projects** – occasionally private development will require a tree to be removed in order to accommodate development of a property. This happens due to relocation of driveways and sometimes due to the construction of underground parking which interferes with the tree roots. City staff works with developers to try to minimize removals caused by private development. When this is not possible and trees are removed, the developer is required to plant two new trees for every tree that is removed.
- 4.) **Tree Removal Requests** - the City Municipal Code includes provisions for property owners to request a tree to be removed from the parkway in front of their property when the tree meets specific criteria identified in the code. This requires the property owner to submit a tree removal request accompanied by a fee and documentation to support their request. The

City's Urban Forester will then inspect the tree and make a recommendation to the Public Works Director. The Public Works Director reviews the request and the City Urban Forester's report and makes the final determination as to whether the tree should be removed or not. Each case is given careful consideration. There is also an appeal process that allows either the applicant or an interested party to appeal the Public Works Director's decision to the City Council.

The following is a compilation of concerns that have been expressed regarding the City's tree removal process followed by a response to these concerns.

Concerns:

- Tree removal damages the climate and impacts the City's beauty and economy. Young saplings do not offer the same benefits as mature trees. Aggressive tree cutting on healthy mature trees compromises well-being of other healthy trees. Trees contribute to the quality of life in Culver City, one of many reasons people choose to live in Culver City.

We agree that the City's urban forest is a very important asset for the city and we take the health of the urban forest seriously. Unfortunately, we have seen increased stress in the City's urban forest caused by recent drought conditions. These stresses make trees more susceptible to disease and pests. In addition, much of the City's urban forest is made up of older trees which may be nearing the end of their life cycle so increased incidence of trees requiring removal is to be expected. The City has a proactive tree maintenance program where trees are trimmed on a regular pruning cycle. Where possible diseased trees are treated and we have experienced some success in this area.

- The same company hired to trim the City's trees also makes decisions about which trees to cut down. The sole judge for removal appears to be West Coast Arborists.
 - West Coast Arborist (WCA) does not make any decisions regarding tree removal in Culver City. Under current City policy and practice, all tree removal requests are reviewed by City staff with recommendations made by the City's Urban Forester (a certified arborist) and the final decision made by the Public Works Director for all cases where tree removal is requested by a member of the public. In the case of tree removal for safety reasons, the City's Urban Forester (a member of the PW Department staff and a City employee), not West Coast Arborists, makes the final determination.
 - All tree removals are determined by City's Urban Forester after he has performed a thorough assessment and exhausted all other viable options (i.e. treatment for disease, pruning, etc.) and removal is considered a last resort. WCA's staff, who are all certified arborists or tree workers, will make recommendations to City staff for further tree evaluations on individual trees

- if they determine potential hazards that they identify while trimming our trees; but again the final determination on what course of action to take is made by the City Urban Forester.
- Trees that are trimmed by WCA are inspected by the City's Urban Forester both before and after the work to ensure the work was done according to instructions and specifications. So in a nutshell, **ALL** work done by WCA is at the City Urban Forester's direction.
- Culver City is not working to find solutions to tree-related issues before cutting a tree down, as advised in the Culver City Urban Forest Master Plan.
 - All tree removals are determined by the City's Urban Forester after he has performed a thorough assessment and exhausted all other viable options (i.e. treatment for disease, pruning, etc.) and removal is considered a last resort. Nevertheless trees are occasionally removed for one of the four reasons stated at the beginning of this document.
 - Residents report that the City only provides 4 days' notice for removals and the lack of communication from the City about tree removal is alarming. Residents report that there is not enough/extensive communication about removal, even if for safety reasons. The requirements set forth in the CCUFMP are not being followed for review and notification processes.
 - - **Notifications for scheduled cycle pruning:** This notification takes place via posting "No Parking" signs on the entire segment or block of street scheduled 48-72 hours in advance of tree trimming.
 - **Notifications for localized scheduled trimming:** The City's Urban Forester will notify the immediate adjacent property owners via door hangers or direct contact; if possible, he will await for confirmation from these impacted property owners before scheduling the work. Localized trimming is done for reasons including but not limited to: request from property owner, clearance issues near dwellings, low hanging branches, obstructing street lights or traffic signs, prior root cutting necessitating the need to balance the canopy, could not be trimmed at an earlier scheduled date due to vehicle parked underneath, etc.
 - **Notifications for tree removals:** The City uses a 100 foot radius for all notifications pertaining to removals via door hangers about 7 to 10 days in advance. If an emergency tree removal needs to take place, the City will notify after the fact via door hangers indicating the tree had to be removed immediately. If the tree removal due to special request and approval by Public Work's Director, letters are mailed to those properties within a 100 foot radius since there is an appeal option with this process
 - Tree removals are not reviewed and approved in a multi-level structure to ensure that the decision is aligned with CCUFMP recommendations.

- Here are some of the most common reasons for tree removal. These reasons can constitute the need to remove trees immediately.
 - Tree is dead.
 - Tree is leaning extensively to the point where the potential target can be a home, vehicle or street.
 - A major branch has broken off a tree that has caused weight instability in the canopy and cannot be corrected with structural pruning or balancing.
 - Excessive root cutting that will impact the tree's stability (i.e. due to the need for sidewalk repairs).
 - A tree is diseased heavily beyond treatment (i.e. pests or disease) and removal is necessary to prevent the spreading of the disease to other trees.
 - Trees damaged by vehicles (ether knocked into by vehicles or major branches clipped by large vehicles).
 - Removals through the tree removal request process.
- All tree removals are determined by the City's Urban Forester after he has performs a thorough assessment and exhausted all other viable options (i.e. treatment for disease, pruning, etc.) and removal is and always has been the last resort.
- Excerpt from the Urban Forest Master Plan states that
 - "In urban and developed areas where people could be injured, property damaged, and activities disrupted, tree conflict or tree failure is an important concern of any municipality. Decisions about whether a tree inspection is required or what level of assessment is appropriate should be made with consideration for what is reasonable and proportionate to the specific conditions and situations. Fortunately, serious damage, injury, or death from tree failure is relatively uncommon. Tree failures during normal weather conditions are often predictable and preventable. However, any tree, whether it has visible weaknesses or not, will fail if the forces applied exceed the strength of the tree or its parts. Tree risk assessment is the systematic process for identifying, analyzing, and evaluating tree risk."
 - Three levels of tree risk assessment are defined in ISA's Best Management Practices:
 - Level 1: Limited visual
 - Level 2: Basic
 - Level 3: Advanced
 - The City of Culver City may employ one or more of these levels on an ongoing basis; the City may choose to subcontract this work to a Qualified Tree Risk Assessor (TRAQ), an International Society of Arboriculture-sponsored qualification.

- Resident commented that tree trimming takes place at the worst time, in spring, when squirrels and birds rear their young. Nests become targets for hawks, owls, and crows.

As part of its continuing practice of recognizing the beginning of the bird nesting season, the Public Works Department does not schedule any tree maintenance work (i.e. trimming and removals) during the months of April and May. Only work necessary due to safety reasons will be scheduled. Tree planting also takes place during this period. As outlined in the Urban Forest Master Plan on page 153, the City maintains a voluntary “moratorium that prohibits tree trimming or removal between April 1 and May 31. The exception to this would be if a tree presents a public safety hazard and must be pruned or removed to mitigate the hazard.” The City abides by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) and has procedures for dealing with trees with active nests.

- Public Works is not working to educate the public about the trees specific to their neighborhood as recommended in the CCUFMP to prevent tree removal requests. Residents want more communication/documentation about maintenance, care, and remedy to disease prior to tree cutting.

The Urban Forest Master Plan provides suggestions for residents on “Caring for a parkway tree” on page 104. The Plan also directs residents to the CalPoly Selectree website to learn more about the specific tree in their parkway. The Urban Forest Master Plan is available on the City’s website.