

FOON RHEE JANUARY 13, 2016 6:00 AM

Don't mess around with trees

HIGHLIGHTS

City Hall is rewriting Sacramento's tree regulations to provide certainty for developers and residents

Advocates are warning that the current draft would weaken protections and lead to more trees being cut down

The City of Trees should be very careful about changing the tree ordinance



BY FOON RHEE

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Call them tree huggers if you must, but they're usually on the right side.

At the moment, they're sounding the alarm – loudly – that a proposed rewrite of Sacramento's tree ordinance could lead to too many trees being cut down.

City Hall seems to be listening. The proposal, which had been scheduled to go before a City Council committee this week, was put off for at least several weeks to consider incorporating community comments.

But policymaking can be as murky as the tule fog that shrouds our winter landscape. "I'm holding my breath," says Judith Lamare, one tree defender.

We don't want to mess around with Sacramento's trees. There are as many as 1.7 million within the city limits, including 75,000 street trees maintained by the city and another 25,000 in city parks.

They make our fair city a far more livable place, providing shade during scorching summers, cutting carbon pollution and beautifying our neighborhoods. I have a large valley oak in my front yard. I don't want to imagine how hot it would get – or how astronomical my air conditioning bill would be – without it.

We're the City of Trees – it says so right on a water tower – and we take a lot of pride in international awards and other recognition. As recently as 2013, Sacramento made a list of America's top 10 urban forests.

But over the years, the city says, tree policies have become outdated, and too much confusion and uncertainty has grown. Attempts during the 1990s and 2000s to clean up the rules weren't fully successful.

So a renewed effort to create an updated urban forestry policy started in August 2013. The proposal, officials say, would consolidate three tree-related ordinances into one, and make the regulations clearer and more predictable for developers, city departments, business owners and residents.

To decide which trees on private property would get protected, the city would jettison a rather vague definition of "heritage" trees – "good quality in terms of health, vigor of growth, and conformity to generally accepted horticultural

standards” – and use more objective standards such as trunk diameter for each species. Removing city street trees with a diameter of 4 inches or greater for a public project would require City Council approval.

It all sounds logical, but too often “streamlining” and “predictability” are code words for letting developers loose.

Storms can down trees, as can the drought, but those are acts of Mother Nature. We have much more control over trees lost to development.

Leaders of environmental groups, neighborhood associations and other advocates calling themselves Trees Sacramento warn that the current draft would weaken protections for trees in city parks and also would mean more removal of healthy trees and fewer plantings of new trees.

In a letter to City Council members, they say the new ordinance would leave it up to the city’s planning director whether to require trees in new development, while requiring the public works director to approve tree removals for “reasonable use” of private property.

One example of what can go wrong, some advocates say, is Sacramento Commons, the major mixed-use project downtown that the City Council approved last July. It calls for replacing 1960s low-rise apartments with mid- and high-rise condominiums, but at the price of about 200 trees.

Lamare, who lived there until moving last year to Fair Oaks, fears that the new tree rules are part of a “misguided attempt” to create more incentives for infill development.

Not all tree advocates are as worried. Ray Tretheway, a former city councilman who is executive director of the Sacramento Tree Foundation, says from what he’s seen of the proposed rewrite, it could lead to stronger protections for more trees.

But he understands the concerns because by opening up the ordinance for changes, the city has “let the genie out of the bottle.”

City Councilman Jeff Harris, who represents East Sacramento and has met with tree advocates, says the revised ordinance will protect substantially more trees, including those in city parks. He hopes to bring the proposal back to the Law and Legislation Committee by March at the latest.

That would fit into the timetable for advocates, who want tree preservation to be a campaign issue in the June city election.

Are they being too alarmist? Maybe.

But it takes years, even decades, for trees to mature – and a long time to overcome mistakes. So it's better to be safe than sorry.

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