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Stakeholders Advisory Committee
Urban Forest Services
Tree Ordinance Revisions



Photo by David Roberts

The Midtown Neighborhood Association (MNA) board has a long history of advocating for street trees in Sacramento's Central City. We believe that trees play a critical role in creating a city that is healthy and sustainable and that Sacramento with its deep flood plain soils is uniquely suited to grow large and beneficial trees. We believe that our tree canopy is a legacy that we must be vigilant to maintain for future generations.

City policies with regard to trees need to be based on the recognition that trees:

- __ help clean the air, including removal of fine particles that can damage lungs,
- __ sequester carbon dioxide thereby reducing green house gases,
- __ reduce heat island effect by shading streets, parking lots and other paved surfaces,
- __ reduce energy consumption by reducing the need for air conditioning,
- __ protect paint and other vulnerable building surfaces by shielding them from direct sunlight,
- __ promote walking and biking by providing shade for walkers and bicyclists,
- __ allow children, the elderly and those with frail health to be outside on hot days,
- __ provide habitat for birds and small animals (including owls and hawks in our Central City), and
- __ provide beauty and relief from what would otherwise be the starkness of a densely built urban environment.

In 2008 our board's concern about the condition of our street trees led us to put together a coalition of neighborhood and environmental groups to advocate for better protection and care of the Central City's urban forest. Unfortunately, the concerns we raised then were pretty much ignored and the Central City continues to lose tree canopy at what appears to be an accelerating rate.

Because of our long history of involvement with tree issues, we had hoped to be included in the Stakeholders Committee, but we were not. In an effort to have our concerns heard, we are submitting the following list of problems that we feel must be addressed in order to reverse the deterioration of the Central City's urban forest followed by a list of the principles/policies that must be part of a new or revised City Tree Ordinance. While our submission is based on our experience in the Central City, we believe that most of what we have to say also applies to other areas of the city.

Due to the following problems, the Central City's urban forest is in increasingly sorry shape with more and more gaps in the canopy. The following is a list of problems observed in recent years:

1. In 2005 under a directive from then City Manager Ray Kerridge to have potential development sites 'shovel ready', Urban Forest Services changed its policy from protecting and preserving existing city street trees to removing and replacing them. Since that time Urban Forest Services has been allowing and, in some cases encouraging, the removal of healthy, full grown trees throughout the Central City in the name of some future, "better" urban forest, leaving current residents without the benefits that trees provide.
2. Canopy trees that are removed are often not replaced or replaced with small ornamentals that do not provide shade.

3. In many cases when Urban Forest Services removes a dead or dying tree, it “forgets” to replace it with a new tree. The computerized record keeping that we were assured would eliminate this problem is not working.
4. Large, healthy trees are being removed because they are ‘in the way’ of development or outdoor seating, because they are next to a tall building and, therefore, cannot be pruned evenly or because they are a species that Urban Forest Services has decided it does not like (e.g. Liquid Ambers).
5. Spacing between trees has become so wide that many blocks may never again have a continuous tree canopy.
6. Many parkway strips have been cemented over leaving tree wells so small that they can’t possibly support a large, healthy tree.
7. Large water backflow devices are taking up major portions of parkway strips, resulting in loss of existing trees and lack of space for new trees.
8. When developers are required to plant new trees to mitigate for the removal of existing trees, the new trees are often planted in a different area, leaving the location where the trees were removed without trees or with an inadequate number of trees.
9. Pruning crews often appear to be incompetent, sometimes removing as much as a third or a half of the crown while managing to leave dead branches and, in some cases, mistletoe. All trees are trimmed whether they need it or not.
10. On many central city blocks pruning is occurring as frequently as every two to three years. The result is over pruning leaving some trees that are no longer capable of providing shade.
11. The number of staff available to maintain new and recently planted trees appears to be inadequate. It is not uncommon for young trees to die for lack of water. This problem has the potential to get worse due to climate change (increasing heat and drought like the one we are currently experiencing.)
12. It appears that excessive pruning is taking money that could be better used for the maintenance of new trees.
13. When new trees are planted they are often destroyed by vandals almost as soon as they are planted. This is particularly true of new trees located near alcohol venues.
14. The notice/appeal period for the removal of healthy trees has been reduced from thirty days to ten days making it difficult for members of the public to respond.
15. There are no sanctions for property owners who remove or radically prune street trees or heritage trees.

16. Some property owners do not understand the value of trees and think of them as a nuisance due to fall leaf drop and the possibility of damage to sidewalks.

17. There don't appear to be clear guidelines about where to place street trees on blocks where there will also be storm water planters (Trees should not be planted in storm water planters as was done in the North Sacramento 'Green Streets' project and, more recently on the north east and north west corners of 16th and O so as to avoid the problem of having to remove trees when planters are cleaned.)

In order to address the problems listed above any new or revised tree ordinance and the guidelines for making such an ordinance operational must incorporate the following principles/policies.

__ Today's urban forest should not be sacrificed for some "better" urban forest in the future.

__ The retention of existing canopy street trees must be a priority. It is better to prune large existing street trees than to remove them.

__ Canopy trees should be replaced with canopy trees. Smaller ornamentals should not be allowed except in those limited situations where a larger tree would create a safety hazard (e.g. under high voltage power lines).

__ It is preferable to plant a canopy rather than a columnar tree even in situations where building height and set back require that the canopy be pruned back on the side next to the building.

__ When a tree is removed, a replacement tree must be planted within a year or less. Urban Forest Services must establish an accurate computerized record keeping system that assures that this happens.

__ Planning staff and Urban Forest Services staff must work together in a coordinated fashion. Existing street and heritage trees must be considered from the beginning of the planning process. Buildings need to be designed in ways that preserve existing canopy trees and allow for new ones.

__ Existing street trees should not be sacrificed to outdoor dining or drinking. Where necessary, outdoor dining space should be limited to allow for a continuous canopy.

__ In those situations where developers are required to provide new trees as mitigation for the removal of trees, those new trees must be planted as close as possible to the site where the trees were removed. Planting new trees blocks away is not adequate mitigation.

__ Wherever possible, canopy should be continuous for the entire length of city blocks.

Trees should be spaced close enough that, once mature, there are no gaps in the canopy.

__ Planning and Urban Forest Services staff should work together to assure that water back flow devices are located so as to minimize their impact on tree planting/tree canopy.

__ Tree wells of adequate size must be required in all cemented parkway strips. When currently existing cemented parkway strips that don't have tree wells or have tree wells that are too small are repaired, such repair must include the creation of tree wells of adequate size to support canopy trees and must be close enough together to allow for a continuous canopy.

__ Trees must be pruned in a professional manner and at appropriate intervals. Urban Forest Services must hire pruning companies with well trained, staff able to judge which trees need pruning and how much. Urban Forest Services must develop a process to effectively monitor pruning contracts.

__ New trees should be cared for in a way that maximizes the likelihood of survival. Urban Forest Services must allocate sufficient staff to assure that new trees are planted properly and are watered on a regular basis until they are well enough established that they no longer need watering. Urban Forest Services should look at financial trade-offs between pruning costs and the costs necessary to maintain young trees adequately.

__ Where new trees are planted near alcohol venues, they must have protective metal fences or stakes placed around them until they are too big for vandals to break them in two. (Once purchased, such fences could be moved and used multiple times.)

__ The Urban Forest is a public resource. Except in emergency situations, when a tree is proposed for removal, notice must be posted for a minimum of 30 days to inform members of the public of the proposed removal and to allow time to file an appeal. This was a policy for over 20 years. The posting period was reduced to 10 days when Urban Forest Services went from its former 'preserve and protect' policy to its current 'remove and replace' policy. In the past, notice of tree removals were also published in the Sacramento Bee.

__ Clear and adequate penalties must be established and enforced to deal with property owners who remove a street tree or a heritage tree without a city permit. Penalties must also be established and enforced to deal with property owners who willfully damage such trees.

__ Urban Forest Services needs to develop a program to educate property owners regarding both the benefits that trees provide and the regulations that pertain to city and heritage trees.

__ Clear guidelines must be established regarding the placement of trees and storm water planters. Storm water planters must be located in such a way that they do not interfere with a continuous canopy.

In conclusion, the Midtown Neighborhood Association Board hopes that the current effort to revise/rewrite Sacramento's Tree Ordinance will result in a much stronger ordinance that recognizes the value of our trees and protects them. Sacramento's Central City once had a beautiful, healthy urban forest. Whether or not we again have such a forest is dependent on this effort.

Karen Jacques,
On behalf of the Midtown Neighborhood Association Board

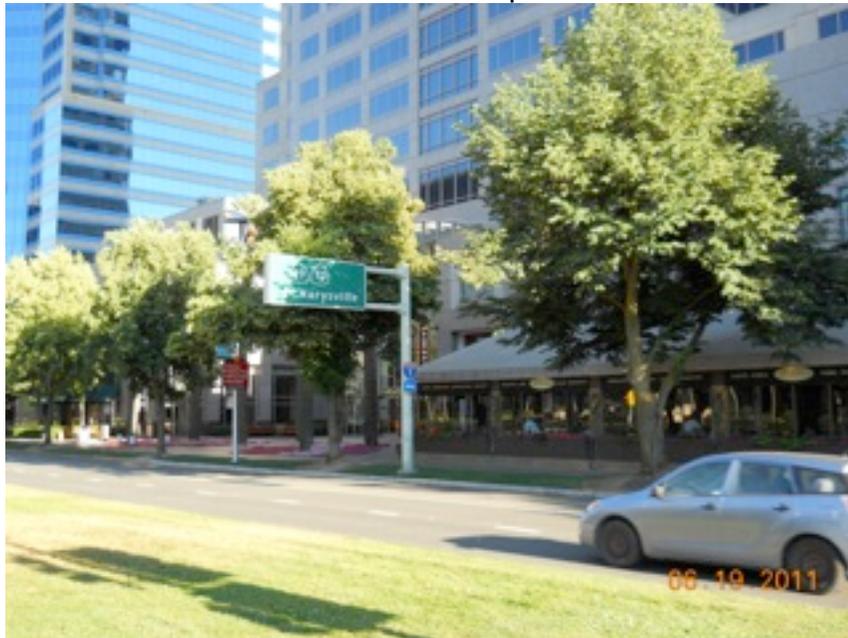
PHOTOS WITH NOTES:



500 block of Capitol Mall. Trees were removed and then replanted on only part of the block. Continuous canopy has been lost. This block would be an unpleasant place to walk in hot weather and illustrates what we lose when large trees are removed and we allow large sections of block that are nothing but cement with no place for trees.



Another view of the 500 block of Capitol Mall.



These are pictures of the 400 block of Capitol Mall and on the 'N' Street side. Existing trees were retained here. This block is much more attractive and walkable than the 500 block.



These pictures each give a slightly different views of the north side of the 1800 block of L Street. When a five story mixed use building was constructed here, existing canopy trees were retained and pruned. This preserved a block long canopy that shades both the sidewalk and part of the street, reducing heat island effect and creating a very pleasant place for pedestrians to walk.



South side of the 1800 block of L Street. Large existing street trees were removed when eight story L Street Lofts building was constructed. Now there are some small replacement trees in front of the Lofts building and no trees at all the western portion of the block. This side of the block is a sad contrast to the beautiful canopy across the street and not nearly as inviting for pedestrians.