

TO: PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION

FROM: PETER GOLLINGER DEPARTMENT: PUBLIC WORKS

DATE: OCTOBER 25, 2022

SUBJECT: FY22 ANNUAL REPORT ON URBAN FORESTRY SECTION

RECOMMENDATION

No formal recommended action is requested from the Parks and Recreation Commission (PRC) for this item. This annual report is an informational update on the city’s Urban Forestry program.

BACKGROUND

As with FY20 & FY21, FY22 continued the theme of challenges and change both locally here in the bay area and beyond. The COVID-19 Pandemic continued to shape our world into FY22 and the subjects of climate change and urban forestry became hot topics nationally.

Our first Urban Forester, Walter Passmore, lost his home in the 2020 CZU fire. This personal tragedy eventually led to an amazing opportunity for the Passmore family. Walter left his position with the city in May of 2021 to become the State Urban Forester for Resource Protection & Improvement with CAL FIRE in Sacramento. Walter’s leadership will be greatly missed but his contributions to our Urban Forestry program will live on. We continue to wish him the best of luck in his new position.

The city of Palo Alto and the Urban Forestry section continued to provide services to our residents throughout FY22, but often under difficult circumstances. While COVID-19 restrictions to reduce the risk to public health were lessened over the course of FY22, they continued to impact employee attendance, productivity, contracts, and budgets. Virtual appointments, new online services and modified customer interaction protocols were some of the ways used to overcome continued COVID-19 challenges. FY22 also saw several retirements in our Urban Forestry staff that led to a promotion and new recruitments.

DISCUSSION

Urban Forestry Section Staffing:

During FY22, the Urban Forestry Section had four vacancies across three different staffing classifications. These positions included two Tree Trimmer / Line Clearer positions, one Tree Contract Inspector position and the Urban Forester position. By the end of FY22, one new Tree Trimmer / Line Clearer had been hired and existing staff were promoted into the Tree Contract Inspector position (a Tree Trimmer / Line Clearer) and the Urban Forester position (an Urban Forestry Project Manager). Recruitments for two additional Tree Trimmer / Line Clearers as well as the newly vacant Urban Forestry Project Manager were underway at the end of FY22.

Staff development remains an essential component of increasing capacity to deliver programs and services in the future. COVID precautions continued to require staff to alter training from in-person seminars to primarily online courses for most of FY22. Despite this, staff completed more than

twenty-five online and in person courses that spanned a variety of safety and arboricultural topics. In addition, several staff members studied for advanced professional qualifications or certifications in arboriculture. Our staff also added our second ISA Municipal Specialist and our first ISA Board Certified Master Arborist in FY22.

Tree Protection Ordinance:

In June of 2022 a multi-year effort to update Palo Alto's tree protection ordinance was approved by the City Council. The tree protection ordinance was last updated in 2001 and did not properly reflect current city policy documents. The new ordinance took effect on July 21st, 2022. This project involved collaboration between city staff from multiple departments, community members, and industry professionals. In advance of its adoption, the ordinance was presented at a total of seven different public meetings.

There are several key updates included in the new ordinance. The definition of a protected tree has been greatly expanded, from only three locally native species (*Quercus agrifolia*, *Quercus lobata* at 11.5" DBH and *Sequoia sempervirens* at 18" DBH), to a total of six locally native species at 11.5" DBH.

- *Acer macrophyllum* (Bigleaf Maple)
- *Calocedrus decurrens* (Incense Cedar)
- *Quercus agrifolia* (Coast Live Oak)
- *Quercus douglasii* (Blue Oak)
- *Quercus kelloggii* (California Black Oak)
- *Quercus lobata* (Valley Oak)

Redwoods remain protected at 18" DBH and all other species are now protected at 15" DBH, with exceptions for high water users (per WUCOLS) and invasive species (per CalIPC). Additionally, any mitigation trees, required replacement trees and trees that are part of a carbon offset program are also protected. All protected trees will require a removal permit and must meet specific criteria for approval. Estimates based on a sample of 10,000 private trees indicate we will now protect almost three times the number of individual trees compared to the previous ordinance.

Other important updates were made including needed updates to the appeals and notification process as well as to the penalties and enforcement process. Notification of protected tree removal will now be required to properties within 300ft of the proposed removal. Additionally, tree owners will need to post notification in advance of major tree work on protected trees. This will allow us to educate the protected tree owners and the public on arboricultural best practices for tree maintenance. Penalties for removal of a protected tree without a permit were increased and clarity on the enforcement process was added.

Under the new ordinance Urban Forestry staff expect that a much higher percentage of applications for development will now be reviewed for compliance with tree regulations. This represents a large increase in workload. To address this, staff will be adding 2.48 new full-time equivalent positions to assist with implementation and enforcement of the tree protection ordinance and the city's Urban Forest Master Plan.

There is still more work to do as we begin the implementation of the updated ordinance. The city's Tree and Landscape Technical Manual is currently being updated, along with other steps in the development review process with the intent of simplifying the process for residents. More importantly, the path toward achieving a larger more mature urban canopy is clear, and the benefits that canopy will provide to Palo Alto residents and visitors will be secured in the years to come.

Customer Service & Work Completed:

Urban Forestry staff responded to an average of 725 calls per month, leading to more than 8,000 work orders during FY22. Staff arborists conducted more than 860 inspections of city trees.

Urban Forestry development review included a total of 605 tree protection fencing inspections. Staff provided review and comments for 134 planning applications. A total of 598 construction permits were routed for review of Urban Forestry condition compliance and required tree protection. A total of 75 permits were reviewed for landscape water use requirements and 38 tree permits were issued for protected tree removal or for work on protected or regulated trees.

Urban Forestry staff and contracted tree crews pruned a combined total of 4007 public trees. This is below our target number of 5,218 per year. This is primarily due to a 50% reduction in public tree pruning contract funding during FY21 and FY22 as a budget balancing effort. This was done to help offset reduced city revenues during the COVID-19 epidemic. Full contract funding has been restored for FY23.

Risk Management and Emergency Response:

Trees are a living resource that are bound by an expected useful life span. Tree Removals are always a difficult decision that signals the last available action to protect public safety or essential infrastructure. In FY22, 270 public tree removals prevented undesirable outcomes. Where possible these trees will be replaced through the public tree planting process.

Staff responded to 255 requests for limb pick-ups during FY22. This continues the slight decrease started in FY21 over the high totals in FY20 and FY19. For comparison, the average number of annual limb pick-ups over the last 12 years is 303.

Our electric line clearance program pruned 5,500 trees away from electric infrastructure. This critical work helps protect public safety and prevent vegetation related outages. Also significant is the seventh award from the Arbor Day Foundation for designation as a Tree Line USA Utility recognizing the joint efforts between departments to provide sustainable utility vegetation management services to our customers. Substation safety was also improved by removing trees and vegetation from the perimeters of several sites to comply with state and federal regulations.

Replenishment:

Tree Planting by staff installed 200 new public trees into individual vacant planter sites within the right-of-way or parks. Native species (mostly oaks) represent 24% of the total. Our non-profit partner Canopy planted an additional 105 trees in South Palo Alto.

Collaboration:

Urban Forestry staff continued to work within multi-departmental working groups to ensure urban forestry objectives were represented in ongoing projects and policy development. Most notably the ongoing work on the Sustainability and Climate Action Plan. New relationships are beginning as the Urban Forestry Staff participates in the creation of the regional Santa Clara Valley Urban Forestry Alliance (SCVUFA). This group is anchored by the Santa Clara Valley Office of Sustainability and includes representatives from virtually every municipality in the county.

Urban Forest Master Plan: The Urban Forest Master Plan continues to be implemented by staff. Technology improvements were initiated, in part through the in-process deployment of the new ESRI based enterprise GIS system.

Contract delays and personnel vacancies did defer some planned programs; however, progress was made on programs to update the Tree Protection Ordinance and the Sustainability Climate Action Plan as well as improve species composition and distribution in conjunction with increasing overall canopy coverage throughout Palo Alto. Upcoming programs set to begin in FY23 include an update to the city's tree inventory

NEXT STEPS AND TIMELINE

- October 2023 – FY23 Urban Forestry Annual Report to Parks and Recreation Commission