



City Council Agenda Report

ITEM NO. 21

DATE: September 17, 2025

FROM: Todd Hileman, City Manager

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SUBJECT: **CONSIDERATION OF AN ORDINANCE OF THE CITY OF SOUTH PASADENA, CALIFORNIA, AMENDING CHAPTER 34 (TREES AND SHRUBS) OF THE SOUTH PASADENA MUNICIPAL CODE IN ITS ENTIRETY**

Recommendation

It is recommended that the City Council introduce the ordinance by title only and waive full reading of the ordinance amending Chapter 34 (Trees and Shrubs) in its entirety.

Background

South Pasadena has been a Tree City USA community for over 25 years, demonstrating its commitment to protecting and enhancing the urban forest.

The City's current tree ordinance set forth in Chapter 34 of the South Pasadena Municipal Code, however, has presented challenges for both staff and the community, including a broad definition of trees subject to the ordinance, trimming and removal criteria and processes that can be difficult to understand, and a permitting process that can be difficult to navigate.

Drawing on best practices from surrounding cities, feedback from commissions, recent permitting trends, and direction provided by City Council at the August 20 meeting, proposed is an updated tree ordinance to modernize the process and provide clarity for both staff and the community. The proposed ordinance streamline permitting and notification requirements, with the goal of creating a clearer and more efficient process. The ordinance also reflects the realities of today's environment with respect to the issues being faced by residents related to homeowner's insurance and compliance with defensible-space requirements by the State.

These updates align with the City's broader environmental sustainability and climate resiliency goals.

Analysis

As part of efforts to modernize South Pasadena's tree ordinance, staff conducted a comprehensive review comparing the City's current policies with those of neighboring cities such as Glendale, Sierra Madre, and Claremont. The review focused on:

- Maintenance responsibilities,
- Development requirements,

- Trimming and removal criteria,
- Permitting processes, and
- Enforcement practices.

These findings provided a framework for updating the ordinance to align with best practices and regional standards while addressing the community's evolving needs.

Overview of the Key Provisions of the Ordinance

In accordance with the feedback provided at the August 20 City Council meeting, staff incorporated the following key changes into the proposed ordinance:

- Refining tree classifications to a centralized protected tree category, focusing only on native species, currently listed in Resolution 7360. Trees subject to the ordinance are now only those trees that are defined as a "Mature Protected Tree." A Heritage Tree is included in the definition of Protected Tree.
- Requiring permits only for trimming or removal of a "Mature Protected Tree."
- Reorganization of the requirements for trimming and removal so that a resident who desires to trim a tree subject to the ordinance only needs to review the "Tree Trimming Permit Requirements" section of the ordinance. The same organization is provided for tree removal permits not associated with development and associated with development.
- A streamlined process for tree trimming permits that requires the City Arborist to evaluate the application against stated criteria and provide a recommendation to the Director of Public Works ("Director"). The Director shall then either approve or deny the application. If denied, only the applicant can appeal the denial to the Natural Resource and Environmental Commission ("NREC") and/or City Council. The 15-day comment period has been removed.
- A streamlined and separate process for tree removal not associated with development that requires the City Arborist to evaluate the application against stated criteria and provide a recommendation to the Director. The Director shall then either approve or deny the application. If denied, only the applicant can appeal the denial to the Natural Resource and Environmental Commission and submitted of a Certified Arborist report is required. The NREC's decision, however, can be appealed to the City Council only by the applicant or those property owners and occupants of properties within a 100-foot radius of the subject property.
- A streamlined and separate process for tree removal associated with development. With regard to this application, the tree removal permit is processed alongside the planning department permits for the development project. Accordingly, the decisions by the Director and NREC, if applicable, are advisory to the decision maker under the Zoning Code for the specific development permit being sought. The process requires the City Arborist to evaluate the application against stated criteria and provide a recommendation to the Director. If the permit is recommended for approval, there is a 15 day comment period provided to those property owners and occupants within a 100-foot radius of the subject property. Upon completion of that comment period, the Director provides its recommendation and the comments to Planning. The Director has discretion to refer review of the application to the NREC at any time during the application process. In either case, reasonable conditions related to the removal of a Mature Protected Tree may be included. Any appeal is in conjunction with the final approval from the decision maker on the development project. New criteria has been established for review of the application.

- A tree removal replacement plan is only required in conjunction with a tree removal application associated with development. The provision regarding the Certified Arborist review of the replacement plan has been revised to require that the applicant now retain its own arborist, rather than the City managing that process. In addition, the arborist is required to look at criteria that focuses on items that relate to the planting of the new trees to ensure its placement is appropriate and provide the optimal conditions for proper tree establishment.
- A new section has been added with regard to the implementation of the tree removal replacement plan to provide more guidance and specificity with regard to planting. Again, to ensure proper tree establishment.
- A new section has been added to require an annual report on the condition of the replacement tree from those granted a tree removal permit associated with development. The report will require the applicant to provide a written report and photographs of the replacement tree to be sent to the Director regarding the status of the tree's health, including its growth, to ensure the tree has been established. This will be required for two years from the date of the Department's final inspection.
- All permits now have an expiration date and with the exception of a tree removal associated with development, the permits expire after one year. Permits associated with development expire upon the date of the last inspection on the development project occurs.
- More guidance throughout the ordinance regarding standards related to trimming and planting, including specific language regarding seasonal timing guidelines for trimming mature oak trees (June 1 – September 30).
- Fire safety and insurance-related factors have been added to the criteria for which to approve a tree trimming or removal permit.
- The tree replacement requirements have been revised so that one replacement tree is required for tree removals not associated with development and for tree removals associated with development, the number of trees depends on the size of the caliper of the tree removed. In all instances, the replacement trees shall be a minimum 24-inch box tree and must be a Protected Tree species.
- A new provision that allows a person to plant a replacement tree offsite at the discretion of the Director.
- If there is an appeal, the appellant is required to pay the appeal fee.
- The City and its contractors are exempt from the ordinance. This allows the City to quickly address issues related to trees that pose a threat to persons or property and address trees that cause legal liability for the City.

Staff believes that all stakeholders (staff and residents) will benefit from a clearer process that is set forth in the ordinance. In addition, a carry-over provision from the recent amendment to the current ordinance allows for the adoption of administrative procedures, regulations and guidelines for the implementation of the ordinance. This will allow the City to adopt regulations and guidelines related to the application of various provisions of the ordinance so that the ordinance is applied consistently. For example, a Mature Protected Tree may be removed if the tree interferes with the structural integrity of an existing improvement on the property. Through the use of the administrative regulations, we can provide examples and state that this interference is demonstrated by a tree that has grown into the eaves of a roofline or has cracked the foundation, or the tree is now laying on the roof.

With respect to permit applications that have been submitted to the Public Works, those applications will be processed under the new ordinance if a permit has not been issued by the

effective date of the new ordinance. For example, if a permit application was submitted to trim a tree that is not a Mature Protected Tree, under the new ordinance a tree trimming permit is not required. If the permit has not been issued, Staff will let the applicant know that no permit is necessary and they can proceed with the trimming of their tree. For permits have been issued as of the effective date of this ordinance, those permits will continue to comply with the provision of the tree ordinance as it existed on September 17, 2025 (the potential date of first reading).

Fiscal Impact

Applicants will continue to pay the required application fees and deposits. If deposits are forfeited, the deposits will be placed in a separate tree fund that can be used for the planting of trees or other uses related to trees at the discretion of the City.

Attachment:

[Attachment No. 1 - Proposed Ordinance](#)

[Attachment No. 2 - Presentation](#)