



## MEMORANDUM

Date: June 2, 2016

To: Board of Park Commissioners

From: Robert Stowers, Acting Parks Division Director  
Jon Jainga, Urban Forestry Operations Manager

Subject: Seattle Parks and Recreation Tree Policy Review

### **Requested Board Action**

This briefing is to provide information and receive feedback from the Board of Park Commissioners regarding Seattle Parks and Recreation's current 2001 Tree Policy, as well as past tree management practices by the department that are outdated and no longer practiced in the industry and in vegetation management. The purpose of the Tree Policy is to maintain, preserve and enhance the urban forest within parks and to provide public safety; increase the overall tree canopy, tree health and longevity within parks; and to ensure that trees in parks are managed in a manner that is consistent with other departmental and municipal policies.

Staff is requesting approval from the Park Board to move forward with updating the current 2001 Tree Policy (Policy 5.6.1).

### **Policy Description and Background**

In May 2010, staff provided an informational briefing to the Commissioners regarding the Tree Policy and past practices. In the past, SPR issued permits to enhance private views through the removal of Bigleaf Maple trees and "topping" of park trees. The permits allowed a trimming process known as drop-crotching or crown reduction to create some height reduction in the trees. Canopy reduction was limited to no greater than 25% of the tree's overall canopy, and all pruning cuts had to comply with International Society of Arborist standards. In some cases, pruning was done in conjunction with the application of hormonal growth regulator (no longer in use) which reduces the elongation of cells in the tree stems, thereby reducing the length the limbs will grow after the pruning.

### **Current Regulations Regarding Tree Cutting**

#### **Parks Tree Management, Maintenance, Pruning and/or Removal Policy 5.6.1:**

Trees, shrubs and vegetation should only be removed to protect the public from hazardous conditions, protect public and private property, and to care for the health of the tree. Examples include:

- ✓ Hazard trees which pose substantial risk to the park users, adjacent properties or park facilities
- ✓ Trees, shrubs and vegetation which are dead, dying, or diseased
- ✓ Trees, shrubs and vegetation which create visibility problems (sight line) near roadways, bikeways and service access areas and may contribute to unsafe conditions to park users
- ✓ By an Approved SDCI Land-Use Permit for development which includes 2-1 replacement
- ✓ Trees, shrubs, and vegetation that may interfere with a designated public viewpoint as designated in Section 10.1 of Policy 5.6.1, **(this is inconsistent with the Environmentally Critical Areas(ECA) Ordinance)**
- ✓ Trees that block trails or obstruct the use and function of park infrastructure
- ✓ Parks sites where overplanting occurred by design; selective trees may be removed to maintain tree spacing for growth and function (Park Arborist)

**City of Seattle Environmentally Critical Areas Ordinance, 25.09.320 (ECA) June 2014:**

Trees and other vegetation in environmentally critical areas (ECAs) are essential for maintenance of a naturally functioning condition that maintains slope stability and prevents erosion, protects water quality, and provides diverse wildlife habitat. Consequently, the City of Seattle protects trees and vegetation within landslide-prone critical areas (including steep slopes), steep slope buffers, riparian corridors, shoreline habitat, shoreline habitat buffers, wetlands and wetland buffers. Within these areas, the ECA code only allows removal, clearing, or other actions that may harm trees and vegetation in limited situations.

The City of Seattle's ECA code allows four types of tree and vegetation work in landslide-prone critical areas (including steep slopes), steep slope buffers, riparian corridors, shoreline habitat, shoreline habitat buffers, wetlands and wetland buffers:

- ✓ Normal and routine maintenance
- ✓ Tree and vegetation removal as part of an issued building or grading permit
- ✓ Tree and vegetation restoration
- ✓ Removal or other mitigation of a hazard tree

**Seattle Municipal Code Chapter 25.11 – Tree Protection**

It is the purpose and intent of this chapter to:

- ✓ Implement the goals and policies of Seattle's Comprehensive Plan especially those in the Environment Element dealing with protection of the urban forest;
- ✓ To preserve and enhance the City's physical and aesthetic character by preventing untimely and indiscriminate removal or destruction of trees;
- ✓ To protect trees on undeveloped sites that are not undergoing development by disallowing tree removal except in hazardous situations, to prevent premature loss of trees so their retention may be considered during the development review and approval process;
- ✓ To reward tree protection efforts by granting flexibility for certain development standards, and to promote site planning and horticultural practices that are consistent with the reasonable use of property;
- ✓ To especially protect exceptional trees that because of their unique historical, ecological, or aesthetic value constitute an important community resource; to require flexibility in design to protect exceptional trees;

- ✓ To provide the option of modifying development standards to protect trees over two (2) feet in diameter in the same manner that modification of development standards is required for exceptional trees;
- ✓ To encourage retention of trees over six (6) inches in diameter through the design review and other processes for larger projects, through education concerning the value of retaining trees, and by not permitting their removal on undeveloped land prior to development permit review. (Ord. 120410 § 2(part), 2001)

#### **25.11.030 - Exemptions.**

The following activities are exempt from the provisions of this chapter:

- ✓ Normal and routine pruning operations and maintenance;
- ✓ Abatement of hazardous tree or tree part as approved by the Director;
- ✓ Emergency activities necessary to remedy an immediate threat to public health, safety, or welfare;
- ✓ Tree removal undertaken as part of tree and vegetation management and revegetation of public park land and open spaces by responsible public agencies or departments;
- ✓ Tree removal approved as part of an Environmentally Critical Area revegetation plan as provided in Section 25.09.320;
- ✓ Tree removal shown as part of an issued building or grading permit as provided in Sections 25.11.060, 25.11.070, and 25.11.080;
- ✓ Removal of street trees as regulated by Title 15 of the SMC; and
- ✓ Additions to existing structures, shown as part of an issued building or grading permit as provided in Sections 25.11.060, 25.11.070 and 25.11.080. (Ord. 122919, § 2, 2009; Ord. 120410 § 2(part), 2001)

SPR has the authority to permit trees to be removed or pruned on park land, e.g., developed parks, natural areas or greenbelts, as approved by the Superintendent or approved designee (Park Arborist). If a tree is located in a City Environmental Critical Areas (ECA) on park land; trees are protected as outlined in SMC 25.09 and SMC 25.11. Any work would need to be reviewed by Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI).

#### **SPR Urban Forest Restoration Goals**

Seattle Parks and Recreation launched a 20-Year Strategic Plan for the Green Seattle Partnership to restore 2,500 acres of urban forested parkland, over a 20-year period from 2005 to 2025. In 1999, American Forests, a world leader in the science and practice of urban forestry, analyzed Seattle's urban forest. The group concluded that from 1972 to 1996 the city lost 46% heavy tree cover and 67% medium tree cover. That loss cost Seattle \$1.3 million per year in rainwater storage and management capacity and \$226,000 per year in air pollution-related health care costs. Forested park lands also clean the air. All trees can capture carbon dioxide and help remove soot and other pollutants, but our native conifer trees do it best because they continue to grow all year round. For example, the average acre of conifer forest captures 13 tons of carbon dioxide each year. Forests do this by incorporating carbon from the atmosphere into the wood mass of the tree. At the market rate of \$6 per ton of carbon absorbed, this process, known as "sequestration," provides city residents \$195,000 of annual air cleaning service. In addition, conifers along roadways trap soot on their leaves, which results in cleaner air and reduced incidence of asthma. The stated goals of the Green Seattle Partnership are to **increase**

**the tree canopy, restore our urban forested park land, and help ensure a green “Emerald City.”**

**Staff Recommendation:**

The SPR Tree Policy should continue to maintain, preserve and enhance the urban forest within parks; increase the overall tree canopy, tree health and tree longevity within parks; and ensure that park trees are managed in a manner that is consistent with other departmental and municipal policies. SPR needs to update the 2001 Tree Management, Maintenance, Pruning and Removal Policy to:

1. Ban any tree topping on public lands
2. Ensure that our tree, shrub and vegetation management practices comply with the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) Standards, current SMC land-use codes, and are approved by a Park Arborist
3. Require that tree, shrub and vegetation management work provides a public benefit to the community
4. Prohibit tree, shrub and vegetation removal for private view enhancement
5. Comply with the City’s Environmentally Critical Areas Ordinance 25.09.320 (ECA) and Tree Protection Ordinance 25.11

Staff is requesting approval from the Park Board and Superintendent to move forward with updating the current 2001 Tree Policy (Policy 5.6.1). This will ensure consistency with current regulations and policies and our urban forestry restoration goals.

**Question/Discussion**

1. Does SPR want to continue the practice of permitting tree removal and/or pruning on park land for private views or view corridors?
2. The current policy is in conflict with our restoration goal of restoring 25 acres of parks forested land. Are you supportive of moving forward with our recommendations for an updated policy that provides clear and consistent guidelines for managing our forested land?

**Public Involvement Process**

Prior to coming back to you with a final recommendation, we will initiate a community outreach process with our stakeholders and the public. A public hearing will be scheduled at a future Park Board meeting, prior to a vote on adoption of the final policy revisions.

**Budget**

The Tree Policy update will be funded out of the existing 2016 Urban Forestry Budget.

**Additional Information**

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**Attachments**

Seattle Parks and Recreation Tree Policy  
SMC Environmentally Critical Areas 25.09.320  
SMC Tree Protection 25.11