

Seattle Permits

— part of a multi-departmental City of Seattle series on getting a permit

Hazard Tree Removal on Private Property

December 29, 2022

The purpose of this Tip is to outline the information for determining whether a hazardous tree or trees requires SDCI approval to remove, how to complete and submit a Hazard Tree Removal application, the requirements for emergency tree removal, and how to evaluate a tree's risk. If the hazardous tree is on a property with an active development application, follow guidance in Tip 242A, [Tree Requirements Associated with Development](#).

Any commercial tree work, including removal of hazardous trees or tree parts requires a registered Tree Service Provider selected from the SDCI [Tree Service Provider Directory](#). For SDCI Tree Service Provider information and how to register, follow guidance in Tip 242C, [SDCI Tree Service Provider Registry](#). Removal of hazardous trees or tree parts does not require a posted notice.

Is the Tree in an Environmentally Critical Area (ECA)?

If you are proposing to remove any tree in an environmentally critical area (ECA), the removal is regulated by Seattle Municipal Code (SMC) 25.09, [Regulations for Environmentally Critical Areas](#). It is important to determine if the tree is located within an ECA and its buffers, since an ECA sometimes only covers a portion of a property. All trees, regardless of size and health, located in an ECA or its buffers are regulated by SMC 25.09 and may NOT be removed without SDCI approval. Follow guidance in Tip 331B, [Hazard Trees](#).

Contact SDCI early in your planning process to determine the extent and impact any tree removal might have in or near an ECA. You can use SDCI's [online map tool](#) to see if your property has any mapped ECA's. SDCI maintains ECA maps for advisory purposes only. The maps do not define the exact boundaries of ECAs identified and are still subject to ECA regulations.

Can I Remove an Exceptional Tree?

SDCI will approve the removal of an exceptional tree protected by the Seattle's Tree Protection Ordinance, Seattle Municipal Code (SMC) 25.11 if it poses a high risk to people or property. An exceptional tree is a tree or group of trees that, because of its unique historical, ecological, or aesthetic value, constitutes an important community resource, and is deemed as such by the Director according to standards published by SDCI.

To determine if a tree is considered "exceptional," you will need to know the scientific name and the diameter at breast height (DBH) or diameter at standard height (DSH), both of which are trunk diameter measured at 4.5 feet above ground. Once you have that information, refer Director's Rule 16-2008, [Designation for Exceptional Trees](#), for the tree species' designated exceptional size requirement. The size requirement may be defined by a single species or by a grove (group of 8 or more trees that are 12 inches DSH or greater that form a continuous canopy).

If you are not sure of the size (DSH) or species of your tree or whether your tree is hazardous, you may need to contact a registered Tree Service Provider to help identify the tree and provide an assessment.

Tree Removal Application Instructions

If you want to remove a hazardous exceptional tree, you must obtain SDCI's pre-authorization.

You must complete your application for a Hazard Tree Removal approval online through the [Seattle Services Portal](#). Login to your account or create one if necessary.

Follow these application instructions to submit an SDCI [Hazard Tree Removal and Vegetation Restoration](#) application. This application is used for either Hazard Tree Removal or Vegetation Restoration.

Note the following: Do not use this Hazard Tree Removal application for tree removal requests that are part of a building or grading site development project. This includes record types: construction (-CN), grading (-GR), demolition (-DM), and master use permits (-LU). For tree removal requested through those records,



follow guidance in Tip 242A, [Tree Requirements Associated with Development](#). Direct inquiries to our staff is via email at SDCI-trees@seattle.gov or through SDCI's [Submit a Request](#) form. To help route your request, indicate that you need help with “Permits, codes, zones, plans,” then select “Land Use” as the type of help you need, and then select “Trees” in the description field. If necessary, we can set up a virtual meeting to discuss potential or actual projects.

What if a Tree Needs to be Removed as Part of an Emergency Action?

Removal of an exceptional or protected tree without first obtaining SDCI approval is only allowed in an emergency. If you remove such a tree during an emergency without SDCI approval, you are still required to submit a Hazard Tree Removal application once the emergency has been mitigated.

SDCI requires that you provide a narrative as part of the Hazard Tree Removal application to explain the risk and emergency, as well as photo documentation of the tree.

How are Trees Assessed for Risk?

Trees with structural defects may be dangerous to people and property. If you are concerned about a tree, we recommend that you have it inspected by a registered Tree Service Provider to identify potential problems and establish an ongoing monitoring and maintenance plan to reduce the risk of property damage and injury.

A tree risk assessment identifies “targets” that may be threatened by a tree failure. Examples of targets include permanent structures, such as houses, garages, decks and other non-movable buildings, power lines, and areas of moderate-to-high-use, such as sidewalks, trails, regularly used sections of yards, parking areas, and roads.

In addition to identifying targets, a Tree Service Provider's risk assessment will check your tree's foliage, branches, trunk, and roots, looking for signs of disease, decay, structural problems, previous damage, and environmental conditions, to determine an overall tree risk rating.

If the hazard tree removal is approved by SDCI, consider leaving a portion of the tree as a wildlife snag. A Tree Service Provider can give you guidance on converting a hazard tree to a wildlife snag. When a dead or deteriorating tree is removed, it can negatively impact wildlife that is dependent on the tree. To minimize this impact, creating a snag retains many of the ecological functions

provided by mature trees, including wildlife habitat, erosion control, and water quality protection.

Tree Risk Assessment Requirements

An International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) Basic Tree Risk Assessment and arborist report is required for your hazard tree removal application. If the hazard tree is clearly dead, both the arborist report and ISA Tree Risk Assessment may be waived if you submit supporting photo documentation for review by staff arborists.

Note the following when submitting an ISA Tree Risk Assessment:

- The assessment must be conducted by a registered Tree Service Provider with a current ISA Tree Risk Assessment Qualification (TRAQ), as established by the ISA. Refer to Tip 242C, [SDCI Tree Service Provider Registry](#).
- You must demonstrate that the exceptional or protected tree meets the criteria for removal per SDCI Tree Protection Code (SMC 25.11). In making this determination, a registered Tree Service Provider will consider crown size, structure, disease, past maintenance practice, potential damage to existing or future targets, and risk mitigation options.

Required Documents

- **(ISA) Basic Tree Risk Assessment** form available from: www.isa-arbor.com/Portals/0/Assets/PDF/Certification-Applications/ISA-Basic-Tree-Risk-Form-fillable.pdf. This must be completed by a registered Tree Service Provider with a minimum of three years of experience in tree evaluation and a current Tree Risk Assessment Qualification (TRAQ), as established by the ISA.
- **Statement of Financial Responsibility** form available from: www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/SDCI/Forms/StmntFinancialResponsibilityAgentAuth.pdf
- **Arborist Report** that summarizes factors contributing to the tree's risk rating. This report should include information on the overall health of the tree, analysis of potential targets, and the dimensions and structure of the tree. When necessary, the report should also include analyses of tissue samples to confirm disease or other issues. This must be completed by a registered Tree Service Provider. For more informa-

tion, see Tip 242A, [Tree Requirements Associated with Development](#).

- **Photos** of the whole tree, defects, and potential targets.
- **Site Plan** that is legible and scaled showing the site address, site tax parcel number, site configuration, ECA and/or buffers, location of existing structures or other potential targets, and location of hazard tree(s). Follow guidance in Tips 103, [Site Plan Requirements](#), 103A, [Site Plan Guidelines](#), and/or 103B, [Environmentally Critical Area Site Plan Requirements](#).

How Much Does it cost?

The current hourly land use fee is charged when you apply. This covers 1 hour of review time. If it takes SDCI more than 1 hour to review an application, additional time will be charged on an hourly basis. The rate is subject to change, so be sure to look at the current fee subtitle, which is located on our fees web page available here: www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/SDCI/Codes/FeeSubtitleFinal.pdf.

Hazard Tree(s) in the Right-of-Way

If you do not know whether a tree is on your property or in the right-of-way, verify this with the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT). If the tree or trees are in the public street right-of-way, you must get approval from SDOT before pruning, altering, or removing a tree or vegetation. This includes open and unopened street and alley rights-of-way. The SDOT Urban Forestry Arborist Office issues these permits.

Submit an application for tree and vegetation pruning, removal, or planting in the right-of-way by following the instructions here: <https://seattlegov.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/360043789333-How-Do-I-Submit-an-Urban-Forestry-Application-for-Tree-Pruning-Removal-or-Planting->.

More information about SDOT permits is available on the Urban Forestry website: www.seattle.gov/transportation/permits-and-services/permits/street-tree-permits.

Hazard Tree(s) in Parks

If you do not know whether a tree is on your property or on Parks owned property, verify this with Seattle Parks and Recreation. If you would like to perform work or hire a contractor to perform work on property owned by Seattle Parks and Recreation, you will need to get approval first. Submit a Revocable Use Permit appli-

cation administered by Seattle Parks and Recreation available at: www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/ParksAndRecreation/Reserve/RUP%20Application%20v2021.pdf.

More information about these permits can be found at the Seattle Parks and Recreation website: www.seattle.gov/parks/reserve/park-land-special-permits.

Contact Us

The best way to contact our staff is via email at SDCI-trees@seattle.gov or through SDCI's [Submit a Request](#) form. To help route your request, indicate that you need help with "Permits, codes, zones, plans," then select "Land Use" as the type of help you need, and then select "Trees" in the description field. If necessary, we can set up a virtual meeting to discuss potential or actual projects.

Clarification of Terms

Arborist Report: For the purposes of this tip, "arborist report" refers to any document prepared by an arborist including, but not limited to, a tree protection report, tree inventory, tree assessment, or report/plan required by SDCI.

Commercial Tree Work: Any of the following actions conducted within the City of Seattle in exchange for financial compensation: major pruning as defined in SMC 15.02.046; removal of trees 6 inches DSH or greater; and the assessment of the health or hazard risk of trees 6 inches DSH or greater. Normal and routine pruning operations that do not meet the definition of major pruning are not commercial tree work.

Emergency (tree related on private property): A situation in which there is an immediate danger to life and property that requires preventive action in a time frame too short to apply for and receive advanced approval. SDCI requires submittal of a full application for the removal once the emergency has been mitigated. SMC 25.11.030 addresses emergency removal of trees protected by the Tree Protection Code. For an ECA, the term "emergency" is defined in SMC 25.09.045G.

Hazardous tree: Any tree or tree part that poses a high risk of damage to persons or property, and that is designated as such by the Director according to the tree hazard evaluation standards established by the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA).

Protected tree: A protected tree is one defined in SMC 25.11 as either an exceptional tree, exceptional grove, or any tree or trees 6 inches DSH or greater on undeveloped land.

Pruning: The pruning of a tree through crown thinning, crown cleaning, windowing or crown raising, but not including topping of trees or any other trimming likely to kill or significantly damage the tree. When you prune trees, you must conform to the ANSI A300 standards outlined in the manual *American National Standard for Tree Care Operations - Tree, Shrub and Other Woody Plant Management - Standard Practices (Pruning)*. When you contract with a company to prune your trees, we recommend obtaining written confirmation that pruning will be in accordance with these standards.

Pruning, major: Removal of branches 2 inches in diameter or greater; removal of roots 2 inches in diameter or greater; or removal of branches constituting more than 15 percent of a tree's foliage-bearing area (SMC 15.02.046.H).

Qualified Professional: This person is qualified to undertake tree risk assessment as part of a development application. (See Director's rule 16-2008.) This person shall have a minimum of 3 years' experience in tree evaluation and shall have worked directly with the protection of trees during construction, as well as having one of the following credentials:

- Society of American Foresters (SAF) Certified Forester
- American Society of Consulting Arborists (ASCA) Registered Consulting Arborist
- Washington State Registered Landscape Architect
- International Society of Arborists (ISA) Certified Arborist with an Associate Degree and/or a minimum of 2 years of college-level credit and/or 120 Continuing Education Units. In addition, this professional must be on the SDCI Tree Service Provider Registry.

Removal: Removal of trees or vegetation, through either direct or indirect actions including, but not limited to, clearing, topping or cutting, causing irreversible damage to roots or trunks; poisoning; destroying the structural integrity; and/or any filling, excavation, grading, or trenching in the dripline area of a tree which has the potential to cause irreversible damage to the tree; or relocation of an existing tree to a new planting location. Encroachment that exceeds the amount allowed under SMC 25.11 may be considered removal.

Target: Person, object, or structure that could be harmed (damaged or injured) by a tree or tree part in the event of a failure.

Topping: The cutting back of limbs to stubs within the tree's crown, to such a degree as to remove the normal canopy and disfigure the tree; or the cutting back of

limbs or branches to lateral branches that are less than one-half (1/2) of the diameter of the limb or branch that is cut.

Read the Code

For more information on existing regulations, read:

- Tree Protection (Non-ECA), Seattle Municipal Code (SMC 25.11)
https://library.municode.com/wa/seattle/codes/municipal_code?nodet=TIT25ENPRHIPR_CH25.11TRPR
- Environmentally Critical Areas, Seattle Municipal Code (SMC 25.09)
https://library.municode.com/wa/seattle/codes/municipal_code?nodet=TIT25ENPRHIPR_CH25.09REENCRAR
- Director's Rule 17-2018, Calculating Tree Valuations and Civil Penalties for Tree Protection Code Violations
www.seattle.gov/dpd/codes/dr/17-2018%20tree.pdf
- Director's Rule 16-2008, Designation of Exceptional Trees
www.seattle.gov/dpd/codes/dr/DR2008-16x.pdf
- Director's Rule 8-2022, Administration of the Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections Tree Service Provider Registry
www.seattle.gov/dpd/codes/dr/DDR2022-8.pdf
- Tip 103, Site Plan Requirements
www.seattle.gov/DPD/Publications/CAM/cam103.pdf
- Tip 103A, Site Plan Guidelines, How to Prepare a Site Plan
www.seattle.gov/DPD/Publications/CAM/cam103A.pdf
- Tip 103B, ECA Site Plan Requirements
www.seattle.gov/DPD/Publications/CAM/cam103B.pdf
- Tip 242, Tree Code Overview
www.seattle.gov/DPD/Publications/CAM/cam242.pdf
- Tip 242A, Tree Requirements Associated with Development
www.seattle.gov/DPD/Publications/CAM/Tip242A.pdf
- Tip 242C, SDCI Tree Service Provider Registry
www.seattle.gov/DPD/Publications/CAM/Tip242C.pdf
- Tip 242D, Tree Public Notice
www.seattle.gov/DPD/Publications/CAM/Tip242D.pdf

- Tip 331, Environmentally Critical Areas – Tree and Vegetation Overview
www.seattle.gov/DPD/Publications/CAM/cam331.pdf
- Tip331B, Hazard Trees
www.seattle.gov/DPD/Publications/CAM/cam331b.pdf
- Standard Detail (SDCI): Tree and Vegetation Protection Detail
www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/SDCI/Codes/TreeDetail.pdf
- Standard Detail (SDCI): Tree Protection Area Sign/Placard
www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/SDCI/Codes/TreeProtectionAreaSign.pdf

Other helpful resources include:

- Application instructions (SDCI): Hazard Tree Removal and Vegetation Restoration Approval on private property.
<https://seattlegov.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/360039043813-How-to-Apply-for-SDCI-Approval-for-Haz>
- Basic Tree Risk Assessment Form (ISA).
www.isa-arbor.com/Portals/0/Assets/PDF/Certification-Applications/ISA-Basic-Tree-Risk-Form-fillable.pdf
Instructions www.isa-arbor.com/Portals/0/Assets/PDF/Certification-Applications/ISA-Basic-Tree-Risk-Assessment-Form-Instructions.pdf
- Managing Hazards and Risk: Trees are Good (ISA).
www.treesaregood.org/treeowner/treehazards
- Maps (City of Seattle ECA): Advisory and intended to help identify critical areas and do not delineate the exact boundaries of ECAs. Environmentally Critical Areas that are not identified on the maps are still subject to ECA regulations.
<https://seattlecitygis.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=f822b2c6498c4163b0cf908e2241e9c2>
- Maps (SDOT): Street Tree Inventory Map.
www.seattle.gov/transportation/projects-and-programs/programs/trees-and-landscaping-program/seattle-tree-inventory-map
- Snags (WDFW): The Wildlife Tree. Guidance from Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.
<https://wdfw.wa.gov/species-habitats/living/snags#wildlife>
- Tree Identification (Free Service): UW Hyde Herbarium.
<https://botanicgardens.uw.edu/center-for-urban-horticulture/visit/otis-douglas-hyde-herbarium/plant-identification-service-by-the-hyde-herbarium/>
- Trees in the Right-of-Way (SDOT) Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT).
www.seattle.gov/transportation/projects-and-programs/programs/trees-and-landscaping-program
- Trees for Seattle: Umbrella for Seattle's Urban Forestry efforts. Planting & Care, Restoration, Management, Regulations, and Illegal Cutting.
www.seattle.gov/trees/
- Tree protection on Construction and Development Sites (DNR): A good overview of tree care and protection measures during your construction project. As this is the Washington Department of Natural Resources' guidance, some details and requirements are different from ours. In those few situations, you need to follow SDCI's tree protection rules.
<https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/SDCI/Codes/TreeProtectionConstructionDevelopmentSites.pdf>
- Tree service providers: SDCI Tree Service Provider Directory.
[www.seattle.gov/sdci/codes/codes-we-enforce-\(a-z\)/trees-and-codes/tree-service-provider-directory](http://www.seattle.gov/sdci/codes/codes-we-enforce-(a-z)/trees-and-codes/tree-service-provider-directory)
- Tree cutting: Reporting illegal tree cutting.
www.seattle.gov/sdci/codes/make%C2%A0a-property-or-building-complaint

Access to Information

Links to SDCI Tips, Director's Rules, and forms are available on our website at www.seattle.gov/sdci.