

Seattle Urban Forestry Commission

Matt Mega, Chair • John Small, Vice-Chair • Nancy Bird • Gordon Bradley
John Floberg • John Hushagen • Jeff Reibman • Peg Staeheli

June 10, 2011

Mayor Michael McGinn
Seattle City Hall
600 Fourth Avenue
Seattle, WA 98104

RE: Seafair's Torch Light Parade and Seattle's urban forest

Dear Mayor McGinn,

The Seattle Urban Forestry Commission is writing to express our concerns about the risks to the health of Seattle trees resulting from the pruning and other measures the City plans to take to accommodate the Seafair balloons on Fourth Avenue. As you know, Seattle is actively working to increase canopy cover in order to maximize the many benefits urban trees provide. Canopy cover goals are included in both the Comprehensive Plan and in the Urban Forest Management Plan (UFMP). The Urban Forest Interdepartmental Team and the Urban Forestry Commission (Commission) have been working hard over the past years to support progress toward these goals. We have made much progress, but have a ways to go.

Last February, SDOT sent a letter to Ms. Beth Knox, Seafair's CEO and President. The letter stated that SDOT would not be pruning or tying back trees along Fourth Avenue to accommodate the balloons in the Torchlight Parade in 2011 or in the future. They took this position in consideration of the risk of adverse impact such measures present to the health and longevity of the trees. The Commission was supportive of SDOT's position. The UFC has now been informed that SDOT will actually prune and tie trees back to accommodate the parade this year.

The Commission did a walk down Fourth Avenue to look at the conditions and noticed that there are several trees, many of them mature, healthy Northern red oaks that would require significant tie backs or pruning to accommodate Seafair's balloons. Excessive pressure will be put on these trees, which happen to be the healthiest in the corridor, to do this work. This might cause irreparable long-term damage to the trees. The City has spent significant resources over the years on planting, establishment, and maintenance of these trees; pruning and tying back the trees as proposed could lead to the loss of that investment. Regardless of accommodations made for this year's parade, pruning and tying back the trees is not a feasible long-term solution.

The canopy cover goal set by the UFMP for downtown is 12%. According to the results of the satellite canopy assessment completed in 2009, downtown only had 4.7% canopy cover in 2007. Thus, much work remains to reach the 12% goal. We cannot afford to lose canopy downtown.

Furthermore, compromising the health and structural soundness of trees in the public right-of-way by repeated, unnecessary pruning, might open the City up for liability in the future if hazards were created due to the resulting poor structure of the trees which have the potential to damage private property or life.

SDOT stated that the pruning and tying work would cost approximately \$6,000. The Commission believes this number to be an underestimate and that the actual cost consideration should include ecosystem services that will be lost, now and in the future, as canopy is permanently reduced to accommodate a single annual event - Seafair's balloons. The Commission believes these trees should not be pruned to accommodate the parade, but if SDOT moves forward with the work, there should be assurances that Seafair will pay the full costs of the work. Also, we feel Seafair should establish a mitigation fund to replace any trees that are damaged as a direct result of work done to accommodate Seafair.

The Commission does not believe it is sound policy to spend taxpayer dollars or allow practices that have negative long term effects, for short-term purposes. The Commission believes that in the long-term, the parade could be re-routed to a street where there would be no conflict with the trees, thus meeting the needs of Seafair while protecting the investment Seattle has made in these trees.

People travel from all over the world to visit the Emerald City, and expect to see healthy mature trees in our downtown corridor. They are a community asset that shades our downtown streets, traps storm water runoff that would otherwise spill into Puget Sound, encourages pedestrians to walk, and provides many other benefits to Seattle.

There needs to be a broader discussion about future solutions which could include discontinuing the use of balloons or the City designating a downtown street for parades and festivals. Also, as part of a long-term solution Seafair needs to look at its logistics and routing. Thank you for your consideration of our concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matt Mega", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Matt Mega, Chair
Seattle Urban Forestry Commission

cc: Councilmember Bagshaw, Councilmember Burgess, Councilmember Clark, Councilmember Godden, Councilmember Harrell, Councilmember Licata, Councilmember Rasmussen, Councilmember O'Brien, Michael Jenkins, Christa Valles, Peter Hahn, Jill Simmons, Joe Bell, Roy Francis,

Sandra Pinto de Bader, Urban Forestry Commission Coordinator
City of Seattle, Office of Sustainability & Environment
PO Box 94729 Seattle, WA 98124-4729 Tel: 206-684-3194 Fax: 206-684-3013
www.seattle.gov/trees/UFcommission.htm