<u>**DRAFT: 1/5/2011**</u>
Seattle Urban Forestry Commission Position Paper on Tree Removal Permits

The Seattle Urban Forestry Commission believes that a tree removal permit system is an appropriate tool to further the goals of the cities Urban Forest Management Plan. Specifically, the goals of increased environmental and engineering benefits from trees, improved condition of the urban forest, equitable urban forest resource allocation citywide, and support for community education can all be supported by a tree removal permit system.

The Commission has seen examples of successful permit implementation in other cities in our region as well as in comparable large metropolitan areas elsewhere in the country.

Before embarking on a path to new regulation and permit requirements it is essential to understand the goals and why a permit system is an appropriate mechanism to achieve them. ***The overarching goal of the permit system is to promote the effective management of Seattle's urban forest on private property.*** In addition, the following specific goals are intended to contribute to that larger mission.

- To provide the city with quality data on tree removal trends in Seattle
- To ensure that major tree work in the city is done safely, by appropriately qualified individuals.
- To serve as a vehicle for public education about tree canopy goals and the benefits of a healthy urban forest.
- To slow the loss of mature tree canopy by providing disincentives to removal of large trees and education on alternatives to removal.
- To promote gains in canopy coverage in accordance with the Urban Forest Management Plan.

We believe a permit system is an appropriate mechanism because, if properly designed and implemented it will provide the following benefits.

- **<u>Tracking:</u>** Understanding tree removal patterns in the city will help allocate replacement resources to maintain equitable access. Gathering information about why people choose to remove trees will help target education and intervention programs to make effective use of city investment.
- **<u>Enforcement:</u>** Seattle relies primarily on a complaint based system of reporting to enforce tree regulations. The permit system should support this approach by creating an online data base so that community members and city staff can quickly research whether a removal was permitted and what data was entered into the application.
- **<u>Treat trees as valuable infrastructure and a public asset:</u>** The city regulates work on utilities systems, including on private property. As a component of green infrastructure trees perform stormwater management and other valuable services. The city has an economic interest in preserving these services for its residents.

- **Safety:** Tree Removal in an urban area is dangerous. The safety of the people doing the work and of the public in general merits that professional standards be established for the removal of large trees. A permit system is a necessary component of establishing and enforcing these standards.
- **Revenue:** Permit Fees can be set such that the system is revenue neutral or possibly a source of revenue to support planting programs if possible. In addition a permit system allows a simple mechanism for reasonable punitive fines when violated.

UFC Assumptions about a Permit System:
1) The permit system should be easy to understand and use for a typical property owner.
2) The permit system should be revenue neutral, collecting reasonable fees to cover the cost of operation.
3) Just as building permits are not intended to prevent development, tree removal permits are not intended to prevent removal but to ensure that it is done safely and with consideration for the public interest in maintaining a healthy urban forest.
4) The Permit system should apply to all zones, recognizing the different canopy goals and land use patterns of each.
5) On lots undergoing development, tree removal should be regulated by the Land Use and/or Building Permit processes. This system is intended for lots outside the development process.
6) Pruning should be addressed in the permit system. Topping or other excessive pruning which will permanently damage or kill a tree can be considered equivalent to removal.
7) Tree removals should be divided into three or more general categories depending on safety and the public interest.

In order to align with these assumptions we recommend that permits be available through a web based interface and also in person through DPD's Applicant Service Center or Neighborhood Service Centers. The interface should ask questions that provide useful data to the city while being accessible at a homeowner level. In addition, the interface should be designed to offer information on alternatives to removal, incentives to retention and replanting programs. Links to information on proper pruning and anti-topping regulations could also be incorporated into the welcome screen.

These questions should be adequate to divide the system response into three categories. These would be based primarily on the size of the tree but could also consider condition, species, quantity, location, and possibly lot size in some cases. Some sub-sets will also be necessary in certain cases. An example of questions we think would meet the permit goals is available in Appendix A.

The three general categories of removal we envision would be:

Registration Only

The first category would be for removals not requiring a permit. This would be based on size and possibly quantity thresholds. The system's response could be "Thank you for registering; your tree does not require a permit for removal. For more information on alternatives to removal or replanting please click here" A .PDF of the application data and case number would be provided and filed at the city. This data would also be available on line when searched by address on the DPD website.

Level 1 Permit Required
For trees requiring a level 1 permit the system would inform the applicant and prompt them to pay a reasonable fee on line or at DPD / neighborhood service centers. If paying on line the applicant would get a .PDF of the permit to print or keep electronically for their records. If not then the system would generate a .PDF of the application data and a case number which you can take to a payment location. In either case the information would also be available in the on line permit data base.

Level 2 Permit Required
For trees requiring a level 2 permit there would be a larger fee and a requirement that the work be done by a certified arborist. If the questionnaire indicates that the applicant is, or has hired, an arborist then the permit will be available on line. If not the applicant will receive a case number and instructions on contacting an arborist to complete the process. A higher level of information would be expected for level two permits including general species information.

<u>**Apendix A:**</u>
Examples of questions the interface could ask of someone applying for a permit:

Name and address of applicant

Preferred contact method and info

Address of removal

Applicant Relationship to Property (multiple choice)
1) **The Property Owner or Manager**
2) **A Renter of the property (note: if this is selected the permit should then require consent from the owner)**
3) **A Certified Arborist hired to remove the tree (enter Seattle business license number)**
4) **A licensed contractor hired to remove the tree (enter Seattle business license number)**
5) **Other (please specify)**

At this point the system should have enough information to understand parcel zoning and size, applicant qualifications, and to check for current development permits. The following questions or the permit requirements may be informed by this information.

How many trees do you intend to remove from the property?

For each tree you intend to remove please answer the following questions:

Is this tree
1) **Deciduous (broad leafed)**
2) **Conifer (needle leafed)**
Make icons available to help choose

What is the approximate diameter of the tree trunk at 42" above the ground?
1) **< 6"**
2) **6"-12"**
3) **12"-18"**
4) **18"-24"**
5) **> 24"**
Provide a help button with information on measuring and guidelines for multi-stem trees.

What is the tree Species?
Provide a List common species with images to choose from and also a not sure option.

Where is this tree located on the property?
1) **Rear yard**
2) **Side Yard**

3) **Front Yard**
4) **Between the street and the sidewalk or property line**

Is the tree entirely on the property or does the trunk or branches cross a property line?

Why are you choosing to remove this tree?
1) **Concerned that it is hazardous to the structure**
2) **Concerned that the tree is diseased**
3) **Concerned about maintenance of the tree**
4) **In order to reduce shade on the property**
5) **In order to enhance a view from the property**
6) **In order to replace with a different tree**
7) **Other, please explain**

Who will the do the removal work
1) **The applicant**
2) **Friends or family**
3) **A contractor (enter name and / or license #)**
4) **A certified Arborist (enter name and / or license #)**
5) **Other…**

This question will not be necessary for small trees or if the applicant has already stated that they are a certified arborist.

Thank you for the information: Your permit request is processing. In the mean time..

Would you like to receive information on alternatives to removal?

Would you like to receive information on incentive programs for planting/replanting

Would you like to be contacted by a volunteer tree steward from your neighborhood to discuss options for this tree.

Provide Links to Urban Forest Management Plan, Canopy Coverage Maps