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2-6-17
Regarding tree pruning coordination between City Departments and SCL Pruning Cycles

The issue:
The Seattle Urban Forestry Commission wants to bring two related issues to your attention: 1) tree pruning coordination between Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT), Seattle City Light (SCL), and Seattle Parks and Recreation (Parks), and 2) SCL tree pruning cycles. These issues arose out of discussions and on-site tours the Commission had last year with these City Departments and related budget reviews of tree maintenance costs.

We recommend that SDOT, SCL, and Parks work to resolve tree pruning coordination issues between themselves and with the help and advice of the Urban Forest Interdepartmental Team. As to SCL pruning cycles we recommend they not be lengthened as currently planned because of the increased impact this action would have on the city's canopy. The extent of pruning by SCL has been raised as a concern by community members before the Commission. If necessary, we recommend outside review of these issues by an independent ISA certified consultant if they cannot be resolved in-house. We ask that the affected departments report back to us on these issues.

Background:
We are concerned that multiple City Departments have separate tree crews, specifically SDOT, SCL, and Parks, and the potentially adverse effects this has on Seattle's urban forest. For example, SDOT and SCL have tree crews scheduled to prune the same trees at different times. Parks is responsible for street trees along the frontage of their parks, although SDOT is in charge of street trees throughout the city in general.

SDOT and SCL are pruning different parts of the same trees with SCL providing clearance of the upper tree canopy from overhead electrical equipment and SDOT providing clearance of the lower tree canopy for vehicles and pedestrians as well as structural pruning of newly planted trees. By coordinating their efforts for electrical and traffic clearance pruning there could be less traffic disruption and a safer working environment when the electrical clearance is provided in conjunction to the traffic clearance work. If the coordination proves to be much more efficient than the current procedure, there may be an additional improvement with a shorter pruning cycle for street trees in the City.

The disruption of work when SCL has to mobilize to provide electrical clearance pruning for SDOT or Parks could be minimized by an increase in coordination of the street tree pruning throughout the City. If the coordination is implemented the City could realize more efficiency in tree work, a maintenance or reduction in the current pruning cycle, and more healthy street trees in the city's urban forest.

SCL is increasing its tree pruning cycle from four years to five years because of budget concerns. Doing that will have a significant impact on Seattle's tree canopy because they will be cutting back the tree canopy even further to keep clearances required from power lines. SCL has only implemented its current 4-year pruning cycle for one round of clearance pruning. Portland, Oregon for example, does pruning on a 2- to 3-year cycle and has to remove less tree canopy as a result. We suggest that SCL maintain its current 4-year pruning cycle to stabilize the amount of pruning and minimize the loss of tree canopy.~~;~~

After the 4-year pruning cycle has been completed two or three times, depending on the budget and level of effort, SCL should examine the feasibility of shortening the pruning cycle further to 2 or 3 years.

The extent of tree pruning in any one year has a significant impact on tree health and survival. Young trees can typically survive more canopy removal than can more mature trees because there is less root growth involved. The industry-recommended amount of canopy removal depends on tree species, age, vigor, –and current level of stress, and can vary from 10% to no more than 25% in one year. Pruning a smaller amount of canopy in more frequent intervals, such as every 2-3 years, is less stressful to a tree.

Conclusion:
We recommend that you direct the various City Departments to explore new ways to increase efficiencies in tree pruning, reduce work disruption for emergency tasks for other departments, and for SCL to maintain or reduce pruning cycles; this may include combining tree maintenance under one coordinating entity for all City Departments. We believe this can increase economies of scale in annual public tree maintenance costs, result in healthier public trees, and increase our ability to achieve and maintain our 30% tree canopy goal for the Seattle by 2037 or earlier.