



**TOWN OF LOS GATOS
COUNCIL AGENDA REPORT**

MEETING DATE: 02/06/2024

ITEM NO: 8

DATE: February 1, 2024
TO: Mayor and Town Council
FROM: Laurel Prevetti, Town Manager
SUBJECT: Receive Report and Provide Input on Town of Los Gatos Street Tree Program

RECOMMENDATION:

Receive a report and provide input on the Town of Los Gatos Street Tree Program.

BACKGROUND:

The Town has a street tree program for the planting, maintenance, and removal of trees that are in or may overhang public streets, sidewalks, and other public places and parkways in Town. The goals of the program are to:

- Keep trees structurally pruned to promote vigor and enhance the safety of the tree;
- Maintain fire fuel clearances on Town lands from adjacent properties and structures;
- Keep vertical clearances for garbage trucks, emergency vehicles, and other commerce; and
- Maintain a robust tree canopy to promote urban biodiversity.

The Town's street tree inventory totals over 14,000 trees which doesn't include all the rural roads such as sections of Kennedy and Shannon Roads. [Chapter 26 of the Town Code](#) governs the program including enforcement, a Master Street Tree List (Attachment 1), and establishes the Parks Commission as the adjudicatory body for street trees.

Los Gatos has been certified as a Tree City USA community since 1980. The Tree City USA Program (the Program) is run by the Arbor Day Foundation in cooperation with the National Association of State Foresters and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest

PREPARED BY: Jim Harbin
Streets and Parks Superintendent

Reviewed by: Town Manager, Assistant Town Manager, Town Attorney, Finance Director, and Parks and Public Works Director

BACKGROUND (continued):

Service. The Program is part of “an international effort to recognize cities and towns that are committed to ensuring the urban forests and trees are properly maintained, sustainably managed and duly celebrated.” To be recognized in this program the Town must demonstrate annually that it meets the five core standards of:

- 1) Establishing Responsibility: The Town must have a written statement that defines which staff and/or Board is responsible for the care of trees;
- 2) Setting Rules: The Town must have an official policy or law that governs management of trees or forests. The policy or law should describe how the work must be performed, when the policy or law applies, and penalties for non-compliance.
- 3) Knowing What We Have: The Town must have and maintain an updated inventory or assessment of local tree resources so effective long-term planting, care, and removal of trees can be established.
- 4) Allocate Resources: The Town must dedicate budget to the routine implementation of the tree management plan.
- 5) Celebrate Achievements: The Town must hold an annual celebration of trees to raise awareness of the program among residents and to acknowledge staff members that carry out the tree program.

DISCUSSION:

Parks and Public Works (PPW) implements the Street Tree Program with one Town Arborist and one tree service contractor to carry out the duties of the program. The Town Arborist also manages the Tree Permit process for trees located on private property. The budget for the tree program totals approximately \$390,000 per year, with \$200,000 assigned to contractual services, \$20,000 for trees and supplies, and \$170,000 for the fully burdened staff salary.

Contracted Services

Tasks such as regular block pruning, tree trimming, and tree removals are carried out by the tree service company. Emergency work is responded to by Town crews and/or contractor crews depending on the severity and ability to respond. The Town Arborist manages the tree service contractor’s daily workload, provides arborist reports and tree related recommendations, and implements the tree permitting process for private trees townwide.

DISCUSSION (continued):

Table 1 represents actual expenses for contracted tree services.

Table 1. Expenses for Contracted Tree Services

Fiscal Year	Actuals (\$)
18/19	244,878
19/20	240,063
20/21	240,401
21/22	216,408
22/23	262,456

The Town arborist directs the contractor to implement block pruning whenever practical. Block pruning is the most efficient and preferred process to maintain the extensive and diverse tree inventory block by block, though this must be balanced with public requests and safety concerns. As a result of various community needs and requests, a regular block pruning schedule is a challenge to maintain. Frequencies of pruning differ between the many species ranging from three-year cycles for Camphor and Melaleuca trees downtown to seven-year cycles for Bradford Pear and Chinese Pistachio trees. Currently, staff is tracking pruning cycles overall at around 14 years to prune all the Town's street trees. Scheduling block pruning is an ongoing challenge due to the competing demands required to manage the town-wide tree canopy.

Storm Response, Emergency Work, and Safety

Storm response and other emergency work are triaged by Town crews and managers depending on the severity of the incidents. Town crews assess the damage, clear the streets and walkways if possible, and the contractor is called for the larger tree damage and removals. Winter 2023 storms following the multi-year drought caused over 80 trees to fall and numerous cracked and broken limb damage responses. While Town crews perform this first response, it is often necessary to have the contractor complete removal and disposal of downed trees due to the size of the tree and other workload demands of Town crews.

Trees that damage streets, gutters, water valves or trip hazards, or other safety concerns are declared to be a public nuisance. Any Sweet Gum (Liquid Amber) tree is assumed to be a public nuisance and at the direction of the Town Arborist may be removed by the property owner at the owner's expense and the Town will grind the stump and provide a new street tree from the Master Tree List.

DISCUSSION (continued):

At present, staff does not proactively seek the removal and replacement of street trees unless there is a mitigating reason. For example, the removal of eucalyptus trees on Overlook Road was recently completed because of community concern and Council direction. Prior to removal of these trees, residents were notified via mailing, and the trees were posted. Staff responded to resident questions that arose because of these notices. If the residents had requested an appeal of the decision to remove these trees, that appeal would have been heard by the Parks and Sustainability Commission.

Removal of Private Trees

In addition to managing emergency response and block pruning, the Town Arborist manages the permitting of removal of trees on private property. Private tree removal permits processed by the Town Arborist vary each year with an average over the previous five years of 194 permits per year. Removal permits were issued for 214 private trees in 2023. Each permit requires field review and observation of the tree and a written determination by the Town Arborist. If visual observation by the Town Arborist is not adequate to determine if the tree requires removal, the arborist will direct residents to secure a report from a licensed arborist.

Any interested person can appeal a decision to cut down or trim a private tree to the Planning Commission. Determinations of the Planning Commission are appealable to the Town Council. The Town Arborist is responsible for providing testimony during the appeals process.

Program Challenges

Challenges with the street tree program are the unpredictability of emergency work and managing funding and expectations across the Town. The management of trees is the most frequent issue or concern cited in calls and emails to PPW. In 2023, Parks and Public Works processed 397 work orders related to tree services and requests in addition to the 214 permits processed for private removals. PPW attempts to balance these demands while maintaining a regular block pruning schedule, but this can be challenging given community concerns regarding dead or diseased trees and the potential safety concerns these can present.

As noted above, in winter of 2023, the Town lost a number of significant trees due to storm damage. While staff work to replace trees, the loss of mature trees is an ongoing environmental and quality of life concern within the Town. Some community partners have proposed projects to support replacement of lost trees, but these projects are still in the planning stages. For example, afternoon Rotary is considering a re-oaking project at Live Oak Manor Park to celebrate their Centennial. These will be brought forward to Town Council for consideration as plans progress.

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DISCUSSION (continued):

Information regarding the tree program was presented to the Parks and Sustainability Commission at its December 2023 meeting. The Commission provided feedback including a recommendation that staff modernize the Master Tree List with consideration for species that are native to Los Gatos, and species that support natural habitats. Specific reference was made to the level of detail and guidance that is presented by the City of San Francisco street trees. Staff is interested in Town Council's direction on this recommendation.

CONCLUSION:

A successful Town of Los Gatos Street Tree Program is a critical component to maintaining the quality of life of Town residents. The program staff and contractors balance a large number of competing demands and priorities to the best of their ability given available resources. The intent of this memorandum is to raise awareness to Town Council and the community about this program.

COORDINATION:

This memorandum was coordinated with the Town Attorney, Community Development Department, Finance Department and Town Manager's office. This item was heard by the Parks and Sustainability Commission at its December 2023 meeting.

FISCAL IMPACT:

This is an informational item, and no financial actions are proposed.

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT:

This is not a project defined under CEQA, and no further action is required.

Attachment:

1. Master Tree List