



City of Sebastopol Design Review Board/Tree Board Staff Report

Meeting Date: October 28, 2025
Agenda Item: 6A
To: Design Review Board
From: John Jay Contract Associate Planner/Christian Macke DRB member

Subject: Consideration of Amendments to Tree Ordinance
Recommendation: Receive report and direct staff with next steps

Introduction:

The Sebastopol Tree Ordinance in many ways is outdated and needs to be updated to be compliant with new State Laws that have been passed since its adoption. With that, Board Member Macke has requested that staff agendize this discussion to the Board in a public forum to gauge board member support for the task.

The intent behind the item today is to open the discussion on the ordinance, provide a recommendation to staff for next steps, and if the board feels it necessary to create a subcommittee to undertake the draft ordinance process. This subcommittee would work with Staff and other departments to draft the necessary language changes that would then be brought back before the board for modifications. Once that revised ordinance has been voted upon by the Board it would be brought forward to the City Council for an adoption hearing that would include two readings and 30 day period before the ordinance would be put into effect.

Recommendation:

Staff recommends that the Board discuss interest in the item and direct staff with next steps. If the board is in favor of moving this task forward, staff also recommends the board assign a subcommittee to accomplish this task.

Attachments:

Slide show

Tree Ordinance Review

Design Review Board Meeting

10/28/2025

Why are we discussing this?

- Several Zoning Code Changes will be required to implement the City's Housing Element.
- The Housing Element contains a number of Programs which require changes to the City's Zoning Code.
- These Zoning Code Changes are required to align the City's existing Code with changes in State law (AB 2162, SB 48, AB 139).
- Recent and pending laws make it difficult to protect the character and fabric of our existing neighborhoods; notably relating to our existing trees.
- The ordinance should be revised to reflect the values we place on our arboreal relatives.

Current Tree Protection Code

Currently, there is little protection for Heritage or Native Trees that would be impacted by the development of an ADU or building addition on either the applicant's *single family or duplex* lot or any adjacent property that may be significantly affected.

Current Tree Protection Code

Chapter 8.12 Tree Protection

8.12.060 Tree removal permit.

A tree removal permit (TRP) shall be required for tree removals within the City, as specified herein.

D. *Tree Removal Criteria.* An application for a tree removal permit may be approved only when at least one of the following conditions is satisfied....

4. A situation exists or is proposed in which structures or improvements, including, but not limited to, building additions, second units, swimming pools, and solar energy systems, such as solar panels, cannot be reasonably designed or altered to avoid the need for tree removal.

Current Tree Protection Code

Chapter 8.12 Tree Protection

8.12.060 Tree removal permit.

E. *Replacement Trees.* Any tree removal permit authorized pursuant to the previous sections of this chapter shall include a condition requiring the provision of replacement trees, in-lieu fee payment, or an approved alternative, as follows:

1. A fee of \$75.00 per required replacement tree shall be paid per required tree removed at the time of submittal of the tree removal application or a minimum of two 15-gallon trees chosen from the list included in subsection [\(E\)\(2\)](#) of this section shall be planted and the fee refunded.

How does Sebastopol compare?

To Healdsburg

Under Chapter 20.24 “Environmental and Historic Resources Protection” in the Healdsburg Municipal Code, the “Heritage Tree” provisions state that when a heritage tree is removed it “**shall be replaced at a ratio of three (3) new trees for every heritage tree removed, or an in-lieu equivalent fee** may be paid based upon a schedule of in-lieu fees established by the City Council.”

How does Sebastopol compare?

To County of Sonoma

Updated Tree Protection Ordinance in 2024: The ordinance protects these trees during construction projects, requiring mitigations for their removal. If trees are lost to removal, the ordinance requires planting new trees or paying an in-lieu fee. The supervisors increased those fees based on changes to the Consumer Price Index since 1989. **Fees in the original ordinance were \$200-\$1,400; now the fees are \$500-\$3,500 per tree removed, depending on the tree size.**

The updated tree protection regulations will increase climate resiliency by preserving the county's tree and forest resources, which act as important carbon sinks by pulling greenhouse gases from the atmosphere. The policies will help the county achieve its carbon neutrality objective by 2030 by maximizing carbon sequestration and minimizing the loss of its [carbon sinks](#).

The tree policy was developed after Permit Sonoma conducted an extensive three-year outreach campaign including eight public meetings, more than 30 meetings with representatives of targeted stakeholder groups and a community survey with more than 500 respondents.

How does Sebastopol compare?

To County of Sonoma

In-Lieu Fees: If replanting is not feasible, an **in-lieu fee may be paid**. The base fee is **\$510 per "arboreal value"** point, calculated based on the tree's size. For example, a 36-inch diameter redwood has an arboreal value of six points, resulting in a fee of \$3,060

What can we do?

How can we make our Tree Ordinance compatible with existing and proposed State Laws while also strengthening protections for existing trees in our community?

Preserving the Town's Character

Sebastopol is well-known for its abundant and cherished trees, which contribute significantly to the city's charm and residents' quality of life. The city's tree-lined streets, forested surroundings, and preserved native species are major draws for those seeking a tranquil, nature-focused community.

“People in Sebastopol cherish remaining a small town, that’s number one. They’re in a small town and they want to stay a small town,” said city manager Larry McLaughlin. *“They also want to maintain the agricultural aspects of the area. We are a very beautiful area, and to see some of its best beauty you have to step a bit out of town. We anticipate that’s not ever going to change in our lifetime.”*

Possible Ordinance Changes

1. **Lower the Permit Threshold:** Require permits for trees 12 inches d.b.h. or more, especially native/long-lived species. The current 20” threshold misses many ecologically valuable trees.
2. **Expand Protected Species List:** Include climate-resilient, large non-native canopy, and keystone wildlife trees. The current native-only focus overlooks crucial urban trees for heat mitigation and biodiversity.
3. **Increase In-Lieu Fees:** Raise fees from \$75 to \$300–500, reflecting the true cost of tree planting/maintenance. A low fee incentivizes removal over preservation; stronger fees discourage unnecessary removal.
4. **Require Higher Replacement Ratios:** Implement tiered replacement ratios: 12–20” tree → 2:1, 20–30” tree → 3:1, Over 30” or habitat tree → 4:1
Large trees offer exponentially more ecological services; replacements should reflect this loss.
5. **Create a Tree Canopy Coverage Goal:** Mandate a tree canopy coverage goal (e.g. 40% by 2040) and require annual reporting. This sets long-term vision; helps align development and replanting to a measurable citywide outcome.
6. **Strengthen Enforcement & Monitoring:** Require arborist inspections pre- and post-removal. Include **stronger fines** (e.g. \$500–\$1,000 per unauthorized tree). Without enforcement, rules may be ignored. Proactive compliance checks and real penalties deter violations.
7. **Offer Incentives to Property Owners by** creating a “Tree Steward” program — offer rebates or small tax breaks for property owners who preserve mature trees or plant more than required. Incentives build goodwill and increase voluntary compliance, especially among residents.
8. **Add Emergency & Climate Resilience Provisions:** Protect trees that provide heat relief (e.g. west-facing shade) or are fire-resilient; prohibit removal unless a certified arborist deems them a hazard. Mature trees are critical infrastructure in the age of climate extremes.

Tree Protection Code

Subcommittee Volunteers?