City of Sebastopol
Design Review Board/Tree Board Memo

Meeting Date: November 24, 2026
To: Design Review & Tree Board
From: Eli Arreola, Associate Planner
Subject: Informational Item - Tree Removal Conditions of Approval

Introduction:
At the regular Design Review/ Tree Board meeting on October 27, 2026, the Board discussed the removal of one (1) mature Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) in the front yard at 562 Petaluma Ave. The tree has a 41-inch diameter at breast height. The applicant applied for a tree removal permit for the Douglas-fir because regular pruning for utility lines on the street side has caused the canopy to appear heavier on the house-facing side. The trunk has a slight lean towards the two houses at 562 and 568 Petaluma Ave.

Analysis:
Ben Anderson, an ISA Certified Arborist serving as the City Arborist, reviewed the application, conducted a site visit, and prepared an Arborist's Report dated September 24, 2026. In summary, the City Arborist's report describes the tree canopy as having good color and density, and he saw no fungal fruiting bodies on the trunk or around the base. According to the City Arborist, properly specified reduction pruning could reduce the likelihood of whole-tree failure, including shortening selected branches on the house side of the canopy and modestly reducing upper crown height where suitable lateral branches are available. Because the tree has lost apical dominance and has no clear central leader, the upper stems could be cut back to lateral branches.

The City Arborist recommended denying the permit request and suggested that standard arboricultural methods can reduce the likelihood of whole-tree failure.

The Board reviewed the staff report, heard from the applicant and the public, deliberated, and determined that approval of the permit for removal of the tree was justified based on the Sebastopol Municipal Code Section 8.12.060(D), tree removal criteria D.5: *The tree has matured to such an extent that it is determined to be out of scale with adjacent structures and utilities, or with other landscape features.*

The Board also conditioned this approval with the requirement for the applicant to plant two (2) 15-gallon replacement trees on-site, with one of them being on Petaluma Avenue.

This item today is meant to be an informational-only item for the Board to be aware of the final language for findings and conditions that were drafted for the tree removal permit after the Board's decision on October 27, 2026. No further action is required by the Board, and this approval notice was issued to the applicant on October 29, 2026.

Attachments:
Approval Letter with Conditions of Approval

City of Sebastopol
Planning Department

October 29, 2026

Paul Belanger
562 Petaluma Ave
Sebastopol, CA 95472

Re: Tree Removal Permit Application (2026-046) 562 Petaluma Ave (APN 004-094-028)

Dear Paul Belanger :

Your application is approved. This approval is in accordance with the findings and subject to the conditions contained in this letter.

The Design Review/Tree Board approved your Tree Removal application (2026-046) at their October 27, 2026, meeting, requesting approval to remove one (1) Douglas-fir tree at 562 Petaluma Ave due to regular pruning for utility lines on the street side, causing the canopy to appear heavier on the house-facing side.

This approval is not effective until the Appeal Period has officially expired. Anyone dissatisfied with the decision of the Design Review/Tree Board has the right to file an appeal within 7 calendar days of the decision. This requires the submittal of a completed City Appeal Form, written statement, and payment of the applicable fee delivered to the Planning Department at 7120 Bodega Avenue, Sebastopol, California, no later than 5:00 P.M. on Tuesday, November 3, 2026.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions at 707-823-6167 or via email at vhenkel@cityofsebastopol.gov.

Sincerely,

Victoria Henkel

Victoria Henkel
Permit Technician

ATTACHMENT 1
FINDINGS FOR APPROVAL

TREE REMOVAL PERMIT
Application (2026-046)
562 Petaluma Ave (APN 004-094-028)

FINDINGS FOR APPROVAL

1. That the application is categorically exempt from the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act, pursuant to Section 15301, Class 4, which includes minor alterations to existing topographical features, such as the removal of a tree.

2. **Tree Removal Criteria D.1**. - *The tree is diseased or structurally unsound and, as a result, is likely to become a significant hazard to life or property within the next two years.*

   This criterion does not apply.

3. **Tree Removal Criteria D.2**. - *The tree poses a likely foreseeable threat to life or property which cannot be reasonably mitigated through pruning, root barriers, or other management methods.*

   This criterion does not apply.

4. **Tree Removal Criteria D.3**. - *The property owner can demonstrate that there are unreasonably onerous recurring maintenance issues, which are deemed necessary for safety or protection of property. The property owner is responsible for providing documentation to support such a claim.*

   This criterion does not apply.

5. **Tree Removal Criteria D.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.*

   This criterion does not apply.

6. **Tree Removal Criteria D.5**. - *The tree has matured to such an extent that it is determined to be out of scale with adjacent structures and utilities, or with other landscape features.*

   At their October 27, 2026 regular meeting, the Sebastopol Design Review/ Tree Board found that this criterion applies.

ATTACHMENT 2
CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL

TREE REMOVAL PERMIT
Application (2026-046)
562 Petaluma Ave (APN 004-094-028)

CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL

1. The Tree Removal Permit shall be valid for a period of three (3) years, except that the applicant may request a one (1) year extension of this approval from the Planning Director, pursuant to Section 17.400.100 of the Zoning Ordinance.

2. An Encroachment Permit shall be required if any public right-of-way is required for tree removal. Please contact the Engineering Department prior to removal if work will be performed, or materials placed, in the public right-of-way. The phone number for the Engineering Department is (707) 823-2151.

3. Tree removals shall only take place during the following hours: Monday to Friday, from 7:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M., and Saturday and Sunday, from 8:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. Additionally, no tree shall be removed on any of the following holidays: New Year's Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Veterans Day, Christmas Day, and Thanksgiving Day.

4. Any replacement trees that will reach a height greater than 20 feet at maturity shall not be planted within 20 feet (measured horizontally) of overhead utility lines.

5. The Sebastopol Design Review/ Tree Board conditioned this approval with the requirement for the applicant to plant two (2) 15-gallon replacement trees on-site, with one of them being on Petaluma Avenue.

Urban Forestry Associates
562 Petaluma Ave Tree Removal Permit Application Review

September 24, 2026

Client: City of Sebastopol Planning Department
Project Location: 562 Petaluma Ave, Sebastopol, CA
Inspection Date: September 21, 2026
Arborist: Ben Anderson

URBAN FORESTRY ASSOCIATES, INC.

Summary

The applicant has requested a permit to remove a mature Douglas-fir in the front yard of 562 Petaluma Avenue, citing its lean toward the homes at 562 and 568 Petaluma Avenue. The tree appears healthy based on this ground-based visual assessment. It has a very slight lean, and I saw no evidence of root plate movement or decay fruiting bodies. In my opinion the likelihood of whole-tree failure can be reduced through standard arboricultural methods. The application does not satisfy any of the tree removal criteria in Sebastopol Municipal Code 8.12.060(D), and I recommend denial.

Assignment

The City of Sebastopol asked me to review a tree removal permit application for a Douglas-fir at 562 Petaluma Avenue and determine whether the proposed removal is consistent with the Sebastopol Municipal Code. I inspected the tree on Monday, September 21, 2026. No one met me on site. While I was at the tree I spoke by phone with Merlin Schluberger of Merlin Arborist Group, who prepared the arborist report submitted with the application.

I reviewed the Master Planning Application, the Merlin Arborist Group report dated June 24, 2026, and a Farmers Insurance Tree Hazard Review Letter dated May 10, 2026. My inspection was a ground-based visual assessment. I did not climb the tree, excavate roots, or perform internal decay testing.



Figure 1. The subject Douglas-fir viewed from the Petaluma Avenue sidewalk, at roughly a right angle to the direction of lean. The trunk has a very slight lean toward the homes at 562 and 568 Petaluma Avenue. Foliage remains on the street side of the canopy.

Observations

The subject tree is a Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*). The application and the insurance letter refer to it as a pine; the Merlin report identifies it correctly as a Douglas-fir. I measured the trunk diameter at 41 inches at breast height. I did not measure the tree's height; the Merlin report gives it as approximately 90 feet.

The tree grows in the front yard planting area between the house at 562 Petaluma Avenue and the Petaluma Avenue sidewalk. The Merlin report places the trunk about 5.5 feet from the edge of the sidewalk. Overhead utility lines run along the street side of the tree. PG&E has pruned the tree for line clearance, but it has not done extensive or clear-to-sky pruning, and foliage remains on the street side of the canopy.

The trunk has a very slight lean toward the homes at 562 and 568 Petaluma Avenue (Figure 1). The live crown begins at about mid-height, which is consistent with the 50 percent live crown ratio given in the Merlin report. The top of the tree has lost apical dominance and no longer has a clear central leader. The canopy has good color and density. I saw no evidence of root plate movement and no fungal fruiting bodies on the trunk or

around the base.

Several large coast redwoods (*Sequoia sempervirens*) stand behind the neighboring house at 554 Petaluma Avenue.

The insurance letter was prepared by an insurance agent from photographs provided by the insured. It states that it is not an arborist report, engineering opinion, or formal determination of the tree's structural integrity, and it recommends consultation with an arborist. It gives no information about the tree's condition beyond what is visible in the photograph.

Discussion

Assessing the lean. Several images in the application materials show a stronger lean than I observed. Google Street View uses a wide-angle panoramic camera, which distorts vertical lines, particularly near the edges of the frame. Photographs taken upward from close to the trunk also exaggerate a lean. A lean is best judged from a distance and at roughly a right angle to its direction. Figure 1 is taken from the sidewalk from that angle, and it is more representative of the lean I observed than the Street View image dated October 2022 in the arborist report.

Crown configuration. According to the Street View imagery in the arborist report, the lower canopy was removed between March 2019 and October 2022. That was at least four years ago, and I saw no evidence that the root plate has moved since. In my experience, a live crown ratio of about 50 percent is not uncommon in mature urban conifers.

Reducing the likelihood of failure. Pruning to reduce load is one of the standard ways of reducing a tree's likelihood of failure (Smiley, Matheny, and Lilly 2017). For this tree, the likelihood of whole-tree failure could be reduced through properly specified reduction pruning, including shortening selected branches on the house side of the canopy and modestly reducing upper crown height where suitable lateral branches are available. Because the tree has lost apical dominance and has no clear central leader, the upper stems could be cut back to lateral branches. That is reduction pruning, not topping, which uses heading cuts to shorten stems to a predetermined height regardless of branch structure (Lilly, Gilman, and Smiley 2019). The arborist report notes a heavy cone crop. Cones can be removed at the same time as pruning, which further reduces load in the upper canopy. The Sebastopol Municipal Code does not require a tree removal permit for pruning less than one-third of the tree crown (SMC 8.12.060(B)(2)).

On this point my opinion differs from the applicant's arborist's. The Merlin report concludes that removal is the only way to significantly reduce the tree's risk under current best management practices. In my opinion, standard pruning methods could reduce the likelihood of failure.

Utility pruning. If PG&E were to remove all of the foliage on the street side back to the trunk, the tree's load distribution would change and the situation would be different. As far as I know there is no plan to do this work. In my experience, when PG&E does propose extensive pruning, it is willing to negotiate with tree owners to reduce the extent of the work.

Sebastopol Municipal Code. From Sebastopol Municipal Code 8.12.060(A), "Tree removal permit, When a Tree Removal Permit Is Required":

1. Single-Family and Duplex Residential. On properties which house a single-family or duplex residential use, no person shall allow or cause the removal of a tree that has a minimum diameter at breast height (d.b.h.) of 20 inches or more if the tree has a single trunk…

2. Multifamily Residential, Commercial, or Industrial. On properties which are currently utilized for multifamily residential, commercial, or industrial uses, no person shall allow or cause the removal of a protected native tree (minimum 10 inches d.b.h.), or any other tree which has a minimum d.b.h. of 20

inches or more…

The application describes the property's use as residential/commercial. Douglas-fir is a protected native tree under SMC 8.12.040. At 41 inches d.b.h., the subject tree requires a tree removal permit under either use category.

From Sebastopol Municipal Code 8.12.060(D), "Tree Removal Criteria," at least one of the following conditions must be satisfied to approve a tree removal permit:

1. The tree is diseased or structurally unsound and, as a result, is likely to become a significant hazard to life or property within the next two years.

The canopy has good color and density. The lean is very slight, and I saw no evidence of root plate movement or decay fruiting bodies. The tree is not diseased, and I did not observe conditions indicating that it is structurally unsound. This criterion is not satisfied.

2. The tree poses a likely foreseeable threat to life or property which cannot be reasonably mitigated through pruning, root barriers, or other management methods.

The tree leans slightly toward two homes, and a failure would likely strike a structure. The likelihood of whole-tree failure could be reduced through selective reduction pruning of the house-side canopy and modest reduction of the upper crown where suitable lateral branches are available. This can be accomplished without topping. This criterion is not satisfied.

3. The property owner can demonstrate that there are unreasonably onerous recurring maintenance issues, which are deemed necessary for safety or protection of property. The property owner is responsible for providing documentation to support such a claim.

The application does not include documentation of recurring maintenance issues. This criterion is not 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.

No structures or improvements are proposed. This criterion does not apply.

5. The tree has matured to such an extent that it is determined to be out of scale with adjacent structures and utilities, or with other landscape features.

The tree is large, but trees of this scale are part of the setting on this block, including the large coast redwoods behind the neighboring house at 554 Petaluma Avenue. The canopy has been maintained around the overhead lines through line-clearance pruning. In my opinion, the tree is not out of scale with adjacent structures, utilities, or other landscape features. This criterion is not satisfied.

Conclusions

The subject Douglas-fir is a protected native tree that requires a tree removal permit. The tree appears healthy based on this ground-based visual assessment, its lean is very slight, and I saw no evidence of root plate movement or decay. In my opinion, the likelihood of whole-tree failure can be reduced through standard arboricultural methods. The application does not satisfy any of the tree removal criteria in Sebastopol Municipal Code 8.12.060(D), and I recommend denial.

Scope of Work and Limitations

Urban Forestry Associates has no personal or monetary interest in the outcome of this investigation. All

observations regarding trees in this report were made by UFA, independently, based on our education and experience. All determinations of health condition, structural condition, or hazard potential of a tree or trees at issue are based on our best professional judgment. The health and hazard assessments in this report are limited by the visual nature of the assessment. Arborists cannot detect every condition that could possibly lead to the structural failure of a tree. Since trees are living organisms, conditions are often hidden within the tree and below ground. Arborists cannot guarantee that a tree will be healthy or safe under all circumstances, or for a specific period of time. Likewise, remedial treatments cannot be guaranteed. Trees can be managed but they cannot be controlled. To live near trees is to accept some degree of risk and the only way to eliminate all risk associated with trees is to eliminate all trees.



Benjamin Anderson, Urban Forester
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