Outlook

Tree ordinance amendments

From [redacted]
Date Mon 10/26/2026 3:43 PM
To Planning <planning@cityofsebastopol.gov>

-Please forward to the Tree Board-

Dear Tree Board-

I understand the Board will be reviewing proposed amendments to the Tree ordinance at your next meeting.

As a former long-time Planning Director who oversaw administration of the ordinance, as well as amendments to it, I would like to offer some comments.

Sebastopol is blessed with a climate which supports a wide range of trees. Property owners throughout the town have planted many, giving some neighborhood the wonderful character of an urban forest.

While I understand the impulse to protect trees and impose more restrictions on their removal, I strongly believe that most Sebastopol property owners highly value trees, and left to their own choices, are loathe to remove them. In the absence of a tree ordinance, Sebastopudlians would not be willy-nilly cutting down trees.

Not to mention that tree removals are expensive, disruptive, and sometimes ecologically damaging, providing further reasons why most owners do not seek removals without good reason. In addition, disproportionate restrictions and bureaucratic requirements may lead to less compliance.

Given those considerations, while I admit I don't know if there have been rampant tree removals spurring these revisions, I question the need to make the Tree ordinance more restrictive, which will result in higher costs, delays and frustration for typical applicants (primarily homeowners) and more workload for the short-staffed City.

I recommend that instead you trust the good intentions of the vast majority of Sebastopol property owners, and not enact unnecessary regulations.

Specifically:

- Poplars and Monterey Pines would not longer be listed as exempt. My understanding (and experience) for their inclusion in the present ordinance is that they are both well-known for being disease-prone and for structural deficiencies. They should remain exempt.
- The tree removal permit threshold for single-family and duplex properties would be cut in half, from 20" in diameter, to 10". For the reasons articulated above, I do not believe this change is necessary. It would subject these property owners to greater costs, delays and frustration with the City.
- An existing provision allowing Planning staff or the Building Official to allow removal of a dead tree, or a hazardous tree, would be eliminated. I have been involved with several situations where a tree is clearly hazardous—such as a tree damaged by a storm, which is partially uprooted and

leaning, posing an immediate hazard to life or property. For the protection of the community, City staff should have the authority to authorize immediate removal in those situations rather than waiting perhaps hours or a day or two for the City Arborist to arrive. Likewise, it can be obvious to Planning staff or the Building Official that a tree is dead and the delay and expense of calling in the City Arborist is unnecessary. Your staff would not be cavalier in such evaluations, and they should be trusted to use their good judgment.

- Where an owner believes that a tree poses a hazard, under the proposed amendments, a new application requirement would be added, to obtain a professional risk assessment. The information provided by the applicant together with the professional judgment of the City Arborist should be sufficient to evaluate these situations. While they can choose to do so, applicants should not be automatically forced to hire an expensive consultant when they are already paying for one: the City Arborist.
- Tree removal findings are proposed to be amended to eliminate language allowing removals in relation to development of second dwelling units and building additions, if such improvements cannot be reasonably designed otherwise. The existing language was intended to balance critical housing needs with tree protection, and it should be retained.
- A finding that allows removal of out-of-scale trees is proposed to be modified so that it only relates to potential or actual damage created by such trees. The intent of this finding, initiated by the Board itself years ago, was to address the situation of very large trees dominating small urban properties. The existing language should be retained.
- A new requirement of mailed notice to properties within 600’ of a tree removal application appears excessive. Mailing to immediate neighbors, or at most, to properties within 150 feet would appear more proportional to this type of application.
- Authorized tree removals would not be permitted on weekends. In my experience, the problem is *unauthorized* removals, not authorized removals. Persons who have complied with the law should not be penalized with this proposed restriction.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments.

-Kenyon Webster