Wednesday, April 29, 2009

Dear Council Members:

In our capacity as the board appointed to recommend on matters pertaining to our urban forest, we are writing to express our unanimous support for and to strongly urge you to vote to approve the three proposed tree ordinances before you (subdivision, large parking lot, and heritage tree). Within the last year, the Planning Commission, Environmental Board, and Urban Forestry Board all overwhelmingly voted to approve these proposed ordinances.

As you may be aware, municipalities nationwide have begun to value the urban forest as infrastructure. Essentially this means that trees perform valuable services, often referred to as "ecosystem services" that otherwise must be provided for with city dollars:

- Trees remove and store major pollutants. Carbon sequestration in forests and wood products helps offset fossil fuel emissions, one of the key drivers of human-induced climate change.[1]
- Trees reduce storm water runoff from 7.8 to 28%, saving the city $425 million annually.
- Trees reduce heat island effect and improve soil and water quality, as well as absorbing carbon dioxide, potentially reducing global warming.

In addition, urban and community forests contribute to energy savings and increased property values. Trees moderate local climate and provide aesthetic and recreational values to communities. **Trees are the only part of a City's infrastructure with the potential to increase in value over time.** Lacking a formal market, however, these natural assets are typically not accounted for and are often overlooked in economic analyses and individual and municipal decision-making.

While across America there has been an increasing recognition of trees as infrastructure and for the indispensable role of the ecosystem services they provide, there have been increased impacts to the urban forest as well. A recent analysis of Austin's urban canopy indicates that our canopy is around 30%, far below the recommended 40% canopy for urban areas.[2] According to the National Association of Homebuilders, nationwide we plant 1 tree for every 3 trees removed.[3] In Austin, data indicate that

---

[1] US Forest Service. "Valuing Ecosystem Services." Available online at http://www.fs.fed.us/ecosystemservices/carbon.shtml

[2] American Forests. "Urban Forests." Available online at http://www.americanforests.org/resources/urbanforests/

[3] National Association of Homebuilders. "Tree Preservation Ordinances." Available online at http://www.nahb.org/generic.aspx?genericContentID=19086

this ratio is closer to 1 tree planted for every 5 removed. Additionally, local data indicate that an average of 42% of protected-size trees are removed in commercial developments[4]. This last piece of information is of critical concern as only our mature trees are capable of performing a significant level of ecosystem services.

We understand the concern voiced by certain members of our community that the City has no right to interfere with private trees on private property. However, because trees perform these vital services for our community, they are integrally tied to the health, welfare, and safety of our entire citizenry. For this reason, the preservation and protection of trees and requirements to plant new trees is authorized by the powers granted to cities under the Zoning Enabling Act of the Texas Local Government Code.[5]

It has been argued that these ordinances may impose undue economic burdens upon a few members of our community. We counter that the consequences of the failure to pass these ordinances will result in far graver, far longer-term economic and ecological burdens that will be borne by every citizen in this community for many years to come.

Respectfully submitted
by the appointees to the Urban Forestry Board
City of Austin

Keith Babberney, Chair

Nevic Donnelly, Vice Chair

Ryan Fleming

Shannon Halley

H. Travis Gallo

---

[4] This figure is derived from a random sample analysis of approved site plans for 2006-07. More current data obtained by WPDR for 2007 corroborates this trend. Shannon Halley, *Mapping the History, Politics, and Iconography of the Urban Forest in Austin, Texas*. December, 2008. Thesis, Master of Science in Community and Regional Planning, Department of Architecture, The University of Texas at Austin.

[5] Chapter 211 of Texas Local Government Code. "Analysis of City of Austin Tree Preservation and Landscape Ordinances." Prepared for the City of Austin, Watershed Protection and Development Review Department. November 29, 2009.