

Meeting Report: Pacific Grove Planning Commission

February 18, 2010, 6:00pm

Council Chambers

Council Member Reporting: Bill Kampe

This report provides commentary and highlights of the meeting.

The Agenda included only a single primary item. The public input and Planning Commission discussion was insightful.

Tree Ordinance

The Pacific Grove Tree Ordinance has been under review by the BNRC (Beautification and Natural Resources Commission). A draft of suggested modifications was delivered to the Planning Commission for comment. I'll try to capture here some of the main aspects:

Public Input:

- Views – the current ordinance prohibits trimming for views. Yet the value of properties is often enhanced by views. Several home owners obtained estimates on the value of their views for their properties. The estimate: \$500,000 per property, for example on Upper Lighthouse near Eardley.
- Criminal penalties – several residents continue to be upset about criminal penalties remaining in the tree ordinance.
- Public Safety/Human Preservation – several speakers expressed concern that the ordinance does not give sufficient consideration to public safety. The ordinance protects trees even when they may be very large, very close to houses, and unpredictable for time to failure. And there is little guidance on trees as a factor in fire safety.
- Replant inspections - one change gives the city the right to inspect replants for up to 5 years, an increase from the current 2 years. This time span is seen as excessive, and an abuse of power.
- Multiple revisions – some who have followed the revision process closely have noted that there are multiple versions, and it is unclear which changes are parts of the recommendation from the BNRC, and where other changes may have been introduced.
- Tree list – the list of recommended trees is still not available on the city website.
- Reforestation plan – there is a frustration that we do not have a context of an overall reforestation plan for the city.

Planning Commission Discussion

- Our general plan states that sunlight and views are important. Our tree ordinance prohibits trimming for sunlight and views. There is a conflict, and our general plan should guide us.
- General Plan for trees – might include
 - View corridors
 - Safety

- Trimming for light
- Public trees impeding private views
- Right kind of trees for infill – we have homes and people where trees once stood, and that changes what is best – both what types and what coverage is expected.
- View corridors should be defined and protected. Trees are being topped in some areas, not by owners but by neighbors, to prevent loss of view.
- History of forested areas since 1902
 - Much of the area was not forested, but dunes and swamp
 - Much cleared to make room for houses
 - The historic forest and the urban forest are different, and must be
- Reasonableness – should be an aspect of the tree ordinance. Good changes in the ordinance:
 - Not in kind replant, but rather a suitable species
 - Not 2 for 1 in all cases, but up to 2 for 1 as feasible
- Criminal penalties/fines – Some specified penalty, e.g. a fine, is necessary for enforcement, at a reasonable level. Criminal penalties sound harsh.
- Privately funded trimming of public trees – what is our city policy?
- Water rationing and replants – when we have rationing, what do we expect from homeowners on maintenance of replants?
- Are loan funds available for tree maintenance? Many homeowners cannot afford tree maintenance, which is expensive. Are loan funds available?
- For new development, lot coverage is currently restrict to 80% of normal permissible coverage. The commission had mixed comments on the proposal to increase to 90%. Some for the increase; some prefer the current 80%.