

**Recommendations
of the
Tree Task Force**

**Presented to the
Land Use and Transportation
Subcommittee**

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Austin, Texas**

TREE TRIMMING TASK FORCE MEMBERSHIP

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	Nicky Bishop / Marie Carmel	Private Arborist/Landscape Architect
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	Michael Embesi	Watershed Protection Department
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	Marty Hood	Wilshire Wood/Delwood 1 Neighborhood Association
	Ray King / Jerry Hendrix	Solid Waste Services
	Tim Mahoney	Urban Forestry Board Chair
	Chuck Mains	Galindo Neighborhood Association
	Michelle McAfee / Ray Henning	Austin Energy
	John Moore	Hyde Park Neighborhood Association
Chair	Carolyn Palaima	Hancock Neighborhood Association
	Bob Seaver / Judy Fowler	Austin Energy
Vice-Chair	Pat Wentworth	Private Arborist
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Facilitator	Elizabeth Phillips	City of Austin, Human Resources

Tree Task Force Report of Recommendations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

—Recognize Trees as Essential Urban Infrastructure

Recommendations include establishment of an oversight/coordination system to better integrate preservation of the urban forest among programs spread through at least nine city departments, to provide a channel for communication, and to review studies and issues related to trees. Support is requested for the Urban Forestry Board inventory to serve as a management tool.

Recommendations also call for increased City funding to manage and plant street and park trees through a newly created Forestry Department in Public Works and PARD.

—Review of Austin Energy Vegetation Management Program

The Tree Task Force evaluated current laws, regulations and safety standards concerning tree trimming, and looked to innovative approaches used in other cities to reconcile the desire for both reliability of electric services and preservation of tree canopy. Austin Energy is amenable to conducting growth rate study to reassess clearance requirements, pruning criteria, species-specific exemptions, and a shortened trim cycle. They are open to evaluating other recommendations made.

—Pursue Engineering Alternatives

Recommendations include pilot programs and engineering testing of creative alternatives developed by Austin Energy Engineering for insulated overhead wire installation, as well as practices used in other cities including higher poles, consolidation of lines, zig-zagging of street lines and installation of tree wire to protect wires from tree branches.

—Work with Citizens and Neighborhoods

Recommendations for implementation of new notification and consultation procedures adopted by Austin Energy, new mitigation procedures and customer alternatives as practiced in other cities. Recommendation for expanded Citizen Forester education program.

—Strengthen the Tree Preservation Ordinance

Recommendations to protect healthy Class 1 trees 10 inches in diameter or greater from excessive pruning or removal; amend the standard for protected trees; strengthen mitigation practices by providing larger sized trees for mitigation planting; create more powerful incentives to preserve trees and stiffer penalties for their destruction.

—Preserve Main Corridors

Recommend development of main corridor designation based on level of existing tree canopy, use by the public, pedestrian traffic and connection to civic centers such as the University of Texas; require alternative system engineering design for such corridors when economically feasible and require advance approval by oversight system of mitigation in the event of unavoidable tree removal on these civic corridors.

—Funding Options

For preservation options to be viable for neighborhoods at every income level, public funds will need to be made available. We do not suggest any one entity bear the costs, but to draw on a variety of funding sources to provide adequate funds for effective programs. Funding alternatives applied in other cities are presented for consideration. Recommendations are also made for reallocation of \$1 million in the city's \$1.3 million fund set aside for underground utilities.

—Transitional Steps

Recommendations approved by Council should be implemented immediately by Austin Energy. To allow for both preservation and reliability, those areas or neighborhoods who choose the new options, in cases where implementation is delayed due to contingencies such as availability of committed funds, time to put administrative structures in place, or Austin Energy's investigation and evaluation processes as outlined in the Austin Energy Agreements, alternative vegetation management practices will be developed jointly by Austin Energy, the oversight system and Neighborhood Association representatives and /or individual customers. There will need to be definite commitments by Council, timelines, and structure put in place with implementation.

—Potential Future Steps

Consider enactment of a new or modified ordinance to prohibit intentional planting of incompatible vegetation on city easements or city property; prohibit sale of invasive or low quality trees; require nurseries to tag trees to display height at maturity.

—Accomplishments in Place

The Tree Task Force can bring to the Council accomplishments already in place concerning Austin Energy's vegetation management policies. Austin Energy has implemented or agrees to implement the following:

- Notify the Neighborhood Associations involved before any planned circuit vegetation maintenance work planning is begun
- Prepare and distribute a customer options sheet with every vegetation work plan
- Purchase flagging for marking trees that has Austin Energy logo on it
- On a tree by tree basis evaluate the selective removal of overhanging limbs on single phase primary wires using the hinge and miss evaluation technique
- Offer to redesign/relocate the lines if possible at the customer's expense

- Provide larger size utility compatible mitigation trees for trees to be planted on COA owned property and PARD will provide watering and care for the 2 year establishment period (note added: mitigation to follow PARD planting guidelines)
- Re-contact all property owners with vegetation work plans on F101

BACKGROUND

In February 2006 the City Council passed a Tree Resolution which directed the City Manager to assemble a task force to review, develop, and recommend to Council policies and procedures related to the City of Austin’s tree trimming removal program. The Resolution was in response to Hyde Park, Hancock, and Eastwoods Neighborhood Associations’ request for a review of Austin Energy’s vegetation management plan and to incorporate tree management into planning for preservation and livability of Austin’s inner-city neighborhoods. Members of the Tree Task Force are listed on a separate page and include representatives from various City of Austin departments, Austin Energy, the Urban Forestry Board, neighborhood groups and associations, and business professionals involved in landscape architecture.

The Tree Task Force met weekly from March to May and worked to:

- Assess current utility clearance standards in Austin and other cities
- Review current laws, regulations and safety standards concerning tree trimming
- Review utility line system design alternatives (e.g., undergrounding and reconfiguring lines);
- Review costs associated with alternative approaches
- Review tree replacement (mitigation) programs
- Assess the value of our urban forest with regard to energy consumption, storm water runoff, urban heat reduction, property values, air pollution, noise pollution, and general quality of life
- Review programs and practices developed by San Antonio, Tulsa, San Francisco, Palo Alto, Colorado Springs, San Jose, Newport, Tacoma, Augusta, Tallahassee and other cities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. RECOGNIZING TREES AS INFRASTRUCTURE

Many cities in the United States are including trees as part of city infrastructure for better management of their urban forest and use of resources. Attached is a summary of urban forest valuations. Recognition of this value can contribute to planning for viable and sustainable growth. The City of Austin can gain efficiencies through increased coordination among its programs, departments, and utilities that have an impact on trees, as well as planning for enhancement of the urban forest. The Tree Task Force makes the following recommendations:

1.a The Austin City Council direct the City Manager to develop and propose a Community Oversight System involving city departments and members of the public to improve coordination

of existing entities to enhance the preservation, protection, and planting of trees as part of Austin's infrastructure.

This oversight system would draw on existing structures and resources of the city including the Urban Forestry Board, neighborhood associations, Neighborhood Planning & Zoning, Planning Commission, PARD, city utilities, and Austin Energy.

Among this Oversight System's recommended responsibilities will be:

- Coordinate Infrastructure projects among city departments and Austin Energy to identify and take advantage of new synergies and potential cost savings for such steps as the underground placement of current overhead utility lines.
- Review results of studies, pilots, mitigation programs, as well as input from the community to resolve issues and broaden communication on tree related concerns.

1.b Develop planned and managed street tree planting (Parks, Public Works, and Neighborhood Planning & Zoning)

1.c Support Urban Forestry Board inventory to provide data set for analysis of increased coverage needs

1.d Facilitate the creation of a new Forestry Department in Public Works to begin planting and caring for street trees.

1.e Increase PARD forestry budget—keep PARD forestry in the parks.

2. REVIEW OF AUSTIN ENERGY VEGETATION MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

The Tree Task Force evaluated current laws, regulations and safety standards concerning tree trimming and found there is room for discernment in federal and state law. We looked to innovative approaches to reconcile the desire for both reliability of electric services and preservation of tree canopy used in other cities, in particular Tulsa and Tallahassee. The charge of the task force also provided for open dialog with Austin Energy which allowed issues on all sides to be aired. Recommendations here are:

2.a Reassess required clearances

- Reduce clearance for overhang on single phase lines.
- Austin Energy to conduct growth rate study to reassess clearance requirements, pruning criteria, species-specific exemptions, and shortened trim cycle.

2.b Investigate the use and effectiveness of tree growth regulators on appropriate trees, i.e., no nut or fruit bearing trees.

2.c Adopt an optional customer-directed alternative for one-year maintenance cycle paid by property owner based on the Tulsa model.

2.d Make adjustments to line clearance contracts

- Allow for a mixed contract terms such as fee for service and time and materials billing with a 6-month review of rates that includes review of performance standards.
- Allow for customer feedback.
- Eliminate contractual incentives to remove mature trees; create incentives for contractors to preserve rather than destroy mature trees.
- Create incentives for responsiveness to customer identified hazards and customer directed trimming.

3. PURSUE ENGINEERING ALTERNATIVES

Older neighborhoods have not had the benefit of comprehensive utility infrastructure design such as is coordinated for new subdivisions or developments. The distribution lines have come in as need has demanded. The Tree Task Force researched what other cities have done to underground including San Antonio, Palo Alto, Oakland, Portland, Colorado Springs, Brookline, and Tulsa. We also benefited from presentations by engineer Bob Seaver with Austin Energy on the different system design alternatives to reduce tree trimming. Recommendations are:

3.a Austin Energy be instructed to evaluate alternative system engineering design whenever extensive trimming and removal is required under the vegetation management plan or where protected trees will be affected. Alternatives will include:

- Undergrounding
- Relocating lines / Consolidating lines/ Zigzagging
- Raising Poles
- Tree Wire
- URD Cable Overhead

3.b Austin Energy will evaluate alternative system engineering design whenever healthy trees twenty-four inches in diameter or larger trees to be affected. If the alternative design is determined to be economically viable, AE will perform the alternative construction.

3.c Neighborhoods and blocks may request system engineering design alternatives contingent on funding or if customers pay for alternatives.

3.d Develop criteria for required alternative designation and for neighborhoods to opt into program. Proposals reviewed by the oversight system.

4. WORK WITH CITIZENS AND NEIGHBORHOODS

The Tree Task Force looked for ways to improve communication between citizens and Austin Energy. We also sought ways citizens could be more active in the process of tree management and to improve the mitigation program. Several recommendations discussed have already been agreed to by Austin Energy and are listed under the section Accomplishments in Place. Recommendations are:

4.a Create an alternative Citizen Forester program to recruit and train citizen volunteers to alert Austin energy of true tree hazards as a better way to maintain reliability and lessen trimming requirements.

4.b Increase public education for “right tree in the right place” for both public and commercial interests.

4.c AE offers 5- to10-gallon trees in customer mitigation program and larger size trees for planting on City of Austin owned property or right of ways.

5. STRENGTHEN AUSTIN’S TREE PRESERVATION ORDINANCE

Austin has experienced rapid growth and the tree canopy has and will continue to be depleted unless effective tree preservation and mitigation can be reinforced to provide for present as well as future health of our urban forest. We recommend:

Protected Trees:

5.a Amend the standard for a "protected tree" from 19 inches in diameter to 10 inches in diameter.

5.b Healthy Class 1 trees 10 inches in diameter or greater are protected against both excessive pruning and removal. Alternative system engineering design required if economically feasible or adjustments made to clearance standard.

Mitigation:

5.c Any development or redevelopment construction should require maintaining or increasing the tree canopy up to 100% replacement either on or near the property where a tree is lost. Provides for mitigation with Class 1 trees where appropriate.

5.d Require10- to 20-gallon trees for mitigation on streets and in parks

5.e Strengthen mitigation provisions of the tree protection ordinance and environmental criteria manual to provide more powerful incentives to preserve trees and exact stiffer penalties for their destruction adjusted regularly to the cost index.

6. PRESERVE MAIN CORRIDORS

Austin initiatives such as Smart Growth or Envision Central Texas promote the concept of livable cities with higher densities. The term walkability has been coined. Protecting shaded street with high levels of pedestrian traffic is consistent with this planning approach and we make the following recommendations:

Main Corridor (Street) Protection:

6.a Develop criteria for main corridor designation based on: level of tree canopy; use by general public and pedestrian traffic; connection to civic area; and consideration as main arterial street.

6.b Require alternative system engineering design for preservation of canopy along the corridor when economically feasible.

6.c For unavoidable vegetation maintenance or hazard tree removal, a mitigation plan is developed in advance of any clearance for review by oversight system. Exceptions made for emergency maintenance.

7. FUNDING OPTIONS

Addressing system engineering design alternatives, mitigation as an integrated part of the City's infrastructure, and increased cost born by Austin Energy to implement recommendations approved will take a sizable investment to get these initiatives up and running and a sustained budget to offer them into the future. For options to be viable for neighborhoods at every income level, public funds will need to be made available. We do not suggest any one entity bear the costs, but to draw on a variety of funding sources to provide adequate funds for effective programs.

7.a The Tree Task Force has reviewed what other cities have done and recommend the Council consider these alternatives. Please see attached.

7.b City planners should aggressively seek Mainstreet grants, block grants, and FEMA funds for infrastructure investments and mitigation.

7.c Make options available for both customer-paid and city-funded conversion to undergrounding or other system engineering design alternative.

7.d Reallocate funds from the 1.3 million in city fund for undergrounding:

- To competition defined in Tree Resolution.
- To commission an American Forests, or like entity, urban ecosystem analysis of Austin.
- To fund a pilot directed by Bob Seaver of Austin Energy to explore system engineering design alternatives to tree trimming. Pilot will include use of URD cable overhead, installation of taller poles and/or reconfiguration of three-phase open-wire from cross-arm construction to a narrower profile open-wire configuration.
- To design and planning for undergrounding a designated areas.

8. TRANSITION STEPS

The Tree Task Force has put forward a wide range of recommendations that, if approved, will take time to be fully implemented. The question of what happens in the interim for tree trimming in the neighborhoods is here addressed.

8.a The Tree Task Force recommendations approved by Council should be implemented immediately by Austin Energy. To allow for both preservation and reliability, those areas or neighborhoods who choose the new options, in cases where implementation is delayed due to contingencies such as availability of committed funds, time to put administrative structures in place, or Austin Energy's investigation and evaluation processes as outlined in the Austin Energy Agreements (see attached), alternative vegetation management practices will be developed jointly by Austin Energy, the oversight system and Neighborhood Association representatives and /or individual customers. Good faith on the part of those choosing alternative options should be evidenced. There will also need to be definite commitments by Council, timelines, and structures put in place with implementation.

8.b Fiesta 1 (F101) circuit vegetation plan conducted prior to moratorium is voided. Prior customer approvals voided. Under Austin Energy's new process, the Neighborhood Associations affected will be notified before any planned circuit vegetation maintenance work planning begins.

9. POTENTIAL FUTURE STEPS

The Tree Task Force did not have the opportunity to fully investigate the following issues, but deemed it important to bring them to Council's attention.

Noted for Future investigation:

9.a Create a new City of Austin Ordinance or modify the existing ordinance to prohibit the intentional and willful planting of incompatible vegetation on City of Austin easements as well as City owned property.

9.b Prohibit the sale in the City of Austin of invasive or low-quality trees.

9.c Require tree nurseries to tag trees to display height at maturity.

Attachments:

Summary of urban forest valuations

Summary of funding strategies

Austin Energy Agreements document