

FRAMEWORK FOR A MODEL TREE POLICY

- for the Protection of Mature Trees on Public Land in Urban Areas

A. BACKGROUND

Subsequent to the Parliamentary investigation into the issues raised by the petition for the Protection of Mature Trees on Public Land in Urban Areas, we, the members of Save Our Trees, with the support of the Western Region Environment Network, wish to provide a framework to assist in the development of a model tree policy, as was recommended by the Committee when it finalised its response to Petition 34 on the 27th June 2007.

GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

There is ample evidence, both nationally and internationally, of the need to value our urban trees and parkland. We commonly hear of the need to protect and develop a city's infrastructure but more emphasis needs to be placed on the social, environmental and financial benefits associated with the protection and enhancement of the urban "green infrastructure".

Many current local government Street Tree or Tree Preservation policies make positive statements about their existing trees such as:

"...a valuable community asset, for environmental, aesthetic and social reasons."

"...our trees are an important community asset, and part of our heritage."

Regrettably, however, the "tree removal and replacement" components of these council policies facilitate the unnecessary removal of many trees that are valued by local residents and the broader community.

Tree removal practices often go against the wishes of residents and ratepayers, and more importantly, they ignore the environmental benefits of mature trees such as CO₂ sequestration, cooling effect, water retention, reduction of surface run-off into storm water drains, reduction of air pollution, protection of wildlife habitat and prevention of soil salinity.

Overseas, there are very progressive programmes underway that Australia should evaluate for their relevance. For example, in America, Tree City USA is a tree planting and tree care programme sponsored by the National Arbor Day Foundation. The South Carolina Forestry Commission Benefits of Urban Trees website: (<http://www.state.sc.us/forest/urbben.htm>) clearly states the benefits of protecting urban trees as part of a city's green infrastructure. The Tree Benefits Estimator available on the Sacramento Municipal Utility District (SMUD) website (<http://usage.smud.org/treebenefit/>) shows that large mature trees sequester far more CO₂ than young replacement trees. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) are also available to assist local government in the management and integration of green infrastructure.

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Recently, in both Subiaco and South Perth, some residents have had to engage their own independent tree experts at considerable personal expense, in order to convince councillors and their staff that decisions to remove certain trees were unacceptable and unsubstantiated. The vast majority of residents in Carr Street, South Perth are opposed to the removal of their street trees and yet their council proposes to proceed with its plans.

Such matters raise questions about the appropriateness of council spending on tree removal and replacement policies and about the motivation to persist with these policies in view of the frequent opposition by the community. More importantly, one must question the environmental credentials of those who promote tree removal in light of available information relating to green infrastructure and the threat of climate change. Tree management authorities cannot maintain professional credibility by promoting the benefits of tree planting while ignoring the environmental damage caused by the removal of mature trees.

TREE - PLANTING PROJECTS

Many community tree-planting activities take place during the celebrations of both Arbour Day in June and National Tree Day in July. There are limits, however, to the availability of public land for such on-going activities, with some schools apparently running out of space. Little is generally known about the survival rate of the new plantings and their prospects for long- term survival under often erratic and dry weather conditions in Western Australia and elsewhere on our continent. If there is at all the risk of ongoing tree-planting activities becoming token goodwill gestures only, should both Arbour Day and National Tree Day broaden their scope to better promote the protection of existing mature trees?

REGISTERS OF SIGNIFICANT TREES

Recent enquiries into the status of some local government Significant Tree Registers indicate that attempts have been made by various individuals in the past to address the issue of tree removal. Some councils have existing Registers that have not been added to or activated for a long time, and residents do not seem to be aware of their existence even though there have been disputes over council tree removal and replacement programmes.

Nedlands Council no longer has a Register of Significant Trees. Victoria Park Council has one that dates back to 2002, and it is based on the National Trust Criteria but “ it has not been added to for a long time”. South Perth Council has a current register and yet the residents of Carr Street do not seem to be aware of its existence. In view of that Council’s Selection Criteria citing “Community Opinion” as one of its “Primary Criteria”, it would be reasonable to expect residents to be advised by councillors of the Register’s existence.

UNDERGROUNDING OF POWER and TREE REMOVAL

Some councils are promoting tree replacement programmes as integral to the undergrounding of power. This decision has generally been taken without prior community consultation and contradicts the original intention to promote better pruning and better canopies with the removal of overhead electricity wires.

EPICORMIC GROWTH

The epicormic growth on previously pollarded trees is one of the main reasons given for the removal of some street trees. Nedlands council has targeted the Queensland Box Trees for removal. These trees are not indigenous to the area but are the dominant street tree in the city. The council intends to survey residents on a street- by-street basis to determine the preferred replacement tree for each street. Similarly other councils have targeted other trees for removal and replacement.

There has been no broad community consultation to determine whether residents and ratepayers would prefer to spend council resources on maintaining the status quo rather than on the financially and environmentally costly removal of mature trees. The loss of amenity to the community has also not been adequately addressed.

PUBLIC LIABILITY

The issues of epicormic growth, the height of some trees and the risk of falling branches continue to influence some council decisions to remove trees. In view of the imperfect condition of many public trees on verges and parkland due to previous pruning methods or other reasons, controlling the size of existing canopies continues to be the best option in the opinion of many residents who would prefer to preserve their public trees rather than have them removed. Well- managed urban trees can have dense, smaller canopies without heavy overhanging boughs that pose a threat to adjacent homes, cars and pedestrians.

LARGE NUMBERS OF DYING TREES ON PUBLIC LAND

Most recently there has been much controversy over the thousands of dead or dying trees and shrubs on public land. We know that many of these deaths have occurred due to the use of chemical herbicides sprayed by council contractors for the control of weeds. However, a Western Suburbs Weekly article, July 24-30,2007 suggests that Kings Park Managers are not sure as to why so many Sheoaks and Jarrah trees are dying in the park. UWA plant expert, Professor (name removed) has been enlisted to assist with the research.

As has been already suggested in material presented to the parliamentary Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs, the condition of the native bushland as well as the trees along some of the avenues in Kings Park has been of concern to many who are regular visitors. Kings Park has also had an aggressive tree removal policy that targets Sugar Gums. Large numbers of these trees have been removed, not

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only affecting the canopy but most likely also having an impact on surrounding vegetation and moisture retention in the soil as the ground becomes more exposed to the drying effects of sun and wind. As recently as National Tree Day, Sunday, 29 July 2007, yellow paint markings were seen at the base of five large Sugar Gums on the edge of bushland along Poole Avenue. Yellow markings on trees usually indicate that they are to be removed.

These tree removal activities that in the past have also extended to the escarpment must be stopped because there is no indication that they have been successful and all the evidence seems to suggest the opposite. The permanent nature of fences designed to protect passing traffic from the risk of rock-fall along Mounts Bay Road does not indicate a successful outcome. The removal of vegetation has been known to have serious consequences often leading to rock-fall and landslide and yet this information appears to have been ignored.

Professor (name removed) suggests that the Jarrah trees are probably dying due to over watering of the turf due to the use of bores. Botanical Garden and Parks Authority acting chief executive, (name removed) suggests that the Sheoaks, may be dying due to reduced surface water and lack of rain. There are many questions that need to be raised in regard to current management practices and the proper monitoring of ground water levels to establish whether over watering in some sections of the Park is contributing to tree deaths in the western section of bushland and the adjacent avenues.

One clear message, to even the casual observer, is that the Park is suffering and that all current practices that may be having a negative impact on both indigenous and non indigenous vegetation, including the use of herbicides, need to be curtailed. The request for a moratorium on tree removal (Petition 34) which was ignored by the Parliamentary Committee, was an attempt to provide time for a thorough investigation into all of the relevant issues without risk of ongoing damaging activities. Unfortunately, the fact that this request was ignored means that the situation will continue to deteriorate until the Committee presents its report on the Petitions to Parliament later this year and the relevant Ministers, in turn, prepare a Model Tree Policy.

These background issues have been presented in order to focus attention on the following recommendations for guiding the “tree removal and replacement” components of the Western Australian Parliament’s proposed Model Tree Policy. The guiding principles are intended to provide the Parliamentary Committee with a practical approach to expedite development of a Model Tree Policy.

B. MODEL TREE POLICY- *RECOMMENDATIONS:*

The following recommendations relate to the “Tree Removal and Replacement” components of current tree management policies covered under state and local government authorities.

1. All trees are of significance to the extent that their benefits to the natural environment and human physical and mental health are of paramount importance. They may also satisfy some of the National Trust Criteria for preservation. Policies should accept this as a major premise and consider the benefits of urban trees as outlined on the South Carolina Forestry Commission website (<http://www.state.sc/forest/urbben.htm>).
2. With the use of Geographic Information Systems, all of a city’s trees, including those with special heritage significance, can be mapped and registered. The register should be readily accessible to the public for viewing on the relevant authority’s website, or at the relevant authority’s premises.
3. Those entrusted with the management of public trees must not assume that “grey infrastructure” is of more value to the community than “green infrastructure”, and the guiding principle should be to thoroughly and transparently explore all possible avenues including reduction of the canopy and root surgery in order to allow both trees and grey infrastructure to be maintained. There are excellent examples of this locally, nationally and internationally.
4. The undergrounding of power and proper maintenance of infrastructure must not be used as a pretext for tree removal.
5. The issues of epicormic growth, danger from falling branches and public liability are not adequate reasons for tree removal when there are the options of pruning, reducing the canopy and root surgery.
6. Urban trees, both indigenous and non - indigenous must not be allowed to die during times of drought and stress due to lack of water. In most cases it is easy for residents or council vehicles to spare some water to allow for their survival and continued environmental benefits. It is both reckless and false economy to save water by allowing trees to die.
7. The precautionary principle must also apply to the protection of trees. Practices that pose any risk to the health of trees, such as the use of chemical herbicides, should not be used and alternative measures should be employed.

8. Where trees have died and they were not of special heritage significance, consideration should be given to the planting of indigenous trees as the replacement tree because they are generally more adaptable to a drying climate and attract local birds. However, if the resident or residents feel a strong sense of loss of amenity due to the death of a particular species, then the replacement tree may be of the same or similar species.
9. In appropriate locations, such as parkland or some wide verges or medians, dead trees that do not pose a threat may be left standing as they provide valuable wildlife habitat and a replacement tree should be planted elsewhere nearby.
10. Where dead trees must be removed, particularly in the case of suspected disease or poisoning, the opinion of an independent arborist and community consultation should be sought.
11. Community consultation and the opinion of an independent arborist should also be sought when there is controversy over the appropriateness of proposed pruning methods.
12. The notion that in an urban environment certain healthy, mature trees should be labelled weeds is outdated and illogical in view of the broader environmental issues such as climate change and salinity. Trees must not be removed for the simple reason that they are of the wrong species or non – indigenous because the environmental benefits that they provide are of paramount importance under current circumstances.

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