



# STAFF REPORT

AGENDA NO: 9g

MEETING DATE: July 7, 2025

**To:** Honorable Mayor and City Council

**Date:** July 7, 2025

**From:** Margaret Glomstad, Parks and Recreation Director – (650) 558-7307  
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**Subject:** Adoption of a Resolution Approving the Updated Themed Block Tree Species List

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## **RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the City Council adopt the resolution to update the Themed Block Tree Species List.

## **BACKGROUND**

During public discussion of the updated Tree Ordinance (Burlingame Municipal Code Chapter 11.06 et seq.) in 2024, staff received public comments regarding the conflict between street trees and overhead electrical utilities, particularly conflicts on streets designated as Themed Blocks.

A street tree-themed block is a block in which one defined street tree species is established and maintained indefinitely. Once a themed block is established and a tree is removed for any reason, the tree is replaced with a tree of the established theme species. Trees are removed for safety or construction purposes only; they are not removed because they do not comply with a designated Themed Block.

Most utility conflicts with Themed Block designated species occur with Red Maples (*Acer rubrum*), Red Oaks (*Quercus rubra*), and London Planetrees (*Platanus acerifolia*) growing to heights that present safety issues with overhead primary electrical conductors. The result is a topped tree that cannot grow to its intended form and requires frequent inspections and utility pruning by utility contractors, followed by corrective pruning by City staff.

Staff reviewed the Themed Block tree species and determined that improvements to the policy could be made to reduce tree and overhead utility conflicts by designating alternative species that resemble existing features of the current designated Themed Block species prone to utility conflicts. These species are generally shorter in stature and should not exceed a height of 25'. The replacement options are described below.

**Red Maple Replacement**

The current Red Maple is a fast-growing, upright tree. The tree has a smooth, grey-colored bark. Leaves are green in the spring and summer and turn red with the fall leaf drop. This species has a moderate need for water and can have aggressive rooting. The Red Maple typically grows to heights of 40-60 feet.

The alternative tree is the **Shangtung Maple (*Acer truncatum*)** (Exhibit B). This specimen grows to a height of 25' and has been recommended by some nurseries as a street tree under electrical utility wires. This tree also has green leaves in the spring and summer, though these leaves appear glossy compared to the dull green of the Red Maple. The Shangtung Maple also has bright red leaves in the fall and is pest- and disease-resistant. This species is available from one of the local wholesale tree suppliers.

**Red Oak Replacement**

The current Red Oak grows at a moderate pace. This specimen tends to grow in broad form, eventually reaching heights that present overhead utility conflicts. This species is deciduous, with green leaves in the spring and summer that turn brown in the fall.

The alternative is the smaller oak species, the **Gambel Oak (*Quercus gambelli*)** (Exhibit C). The Gambel Oak is native to the Southwest. It often appears shrubby in its natural form. This species will require significant training and pruning by staff to establish itself as a street tree in the urban environment. The Gambel Oak is susceptible to fungal diseases such as anthracnose and powdery mildew, similar to Red Oaks. The Gambel Oak produces green leaves in the spring and summer that turn brown in the fall. This species can be sourced through a local wholesale nursery.

**London Planetree Replacement**

The current London Planetree is a fast-growing, upright tree that can reach heights of 80'. The City currently plants the 'Columbia' variety because it has the greatest disease resistance to common fungal diseases, such as anthracnose and powdery mildew. These trees have strong vertical growth, often presenting utility conflicts within five years.

The alternative is the **Aphlen's Globe Planetree (*Platanus acerifolia* 'Alphen's Globe')**, a dwarf variety of Planetree (Exhibit D). This is a newly developed European variety that mimics the same look as the current Planetrees but is grafted to a dwarfing rootstock to limit the tree's growth. Staff has been unable to source this species in the United States. Another variety researched was the ***Platanus acerifolia* 'Mirkovec'**. This is another European variety with similar attributes. It, too, cannot be sourced in the United States at this time. Since there is no suitable smaller-stature Planetree available, staff recommends using one of the alternative maple species listed above.

**DISCUSSION**

At the February 6, 2025, Beautification Commission meeting, staff presented information about Themed Blocks in general and raised the issue about utility conflicts. The Commissioners directed staff to research and provide the Commission with potential opportunities to limit utility conflicts with trees (Exhibit E).

At the March 6, 2025, Beautification Commission meeting, staff requested the Commission either:

- Modify Themed Block plantings that create utility conflicts by designating new Themed Species for locations in conflict.
- Modify Themed Block plantings that create utility conflicts by allowing property owners to select from the City's tree list for primary utilities for locations in conflict.
- Leave the current Themed Block designation as is.

After listening to public comments and discussion, the Commission directed staff to research specific alternatives that best resemble the intended look of current Themed Block Species in conflict with utilities (Exhibit F).

On May 1, 2025, the Beautification Commission again discussed the Themed Block utility conflicts. The Commission received public comments and discussed potential revisions related to the Themed Block Tree Species list. The Commission approved modifying the Themed Block designation where suitable alternatives could be selected to retain the intended look of the original Themed Block designation while reducing the likelihood of utility conflicts, as listed below.

- Modify Themed Block designation for Red Maples to allow for the Shangtung Maple (*Acer Truncatum*) to be planted in locations with overhead primary electrical conductors.
- Modify the Themed Block designation for Red Oaks to allow for the Gambel Oak (*Quercus Gambelli*) to be planted in locations with overhead primary electrical conductors.

The Commission opted to leave the London Planetree Themed Block designation unchanged as a viable alternative that resembles the current look of the Themed Block species cannot be sourced (Exhibit G).

As part of the City's efforts to increase public outreach and in compliance with the updated Tree Ordinance, staff reached out in several ways to inform residents of public meetings regarding Themed Blocks discussions. This included e-News articles, content on the City's social media platforms, and over 3,700 direct mailings to residents and property owners in the Themed Block areas. In total, three mailings occurred at a cost of over \$1,700 per mailing.

### **FISCAL IMPACT**

The fiscal impact is unknown at this time. However, staff believes that the costs will likely be lower in the long term due to less maintenance work.

Exhibits:

- Resolution
- Shangtung Maple Data Sheet
- Gambel Oak Data Sheet
- Alphen's Globe Planetree Data Sheet
- February 6, 2025, Beautification Commission Meeting Staff Report and Minutes
- March 6, 2025, Beautification Commission Meeting Staff Report and Minutes
- May 1, 2025, Beautification Commission Meeting Staff Report and Draft Minutes