



STAFF REPORT

To: Beautification Commission

Date: December 4, 2025

From: Richard Holtz, Parks Superintendent/City Arborist (650) 558-7333
Veronica Flores, Administrative Assistant II (650) 558-7330

Subject: Consideration of Petition to Remove Themed Block Designation for the 1600 Block of Chapin Avenue

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommend the Commission review the staff report, receive public comment, and approve or deny the petition to remove the Themed Block Designation for the 1600 Block of Chapin Ave.

BACKGROUND

A street tree themed block is defined as a block in which one dominant species of street tree is established and maintained indefinitely. Once a themed block is established and a tree is removed for any reason, the tree would be replaced with a tree of the established theme species.

Themed Blocks were originally established during the development phase of certain neighborhoods. The concept was memorialized when the idea for establishing Themed Blocks was first introduced to the City Council by two interested citizens who wanted to help maintain the historic and aesthetic look and feel of several blocks with a dominant tree species. The idea was referred to the Beautification Commission for consideration.

In April 2008, the Beautification Commission heard the proposal, which included discussion on several topics, including the following: width of available planting areas, altering current planting lists, changing how street trees are selected by district/block/neighborhood, (re)introducing the concept of a dominant species, updating the tree inventory, and potential elimination of tree categories from planting plans (ornamentals and evergreens). In May 2008, then Parks and Recreation Director Schwartz facilitated a discussion between the Commission and community members. As a result of that discussion, the Commission made the following recommendations to the City Council:

- Retain existing 'themed' streets in the City of Burlingame by replacing them with existing species if the dominant species on the street is of tall form. This is regardless of disruptions to sidewalks.
- Do not create 'themed' streets where they currently do not exist and allow the property owners to choose from the appropriate tree list.
- Staff should revise the official street tree lists to contain trees that only have the tallest, most significant canopies.
- In addition, retain 'ornamentals' and 'evergreen' tree species with the tallest, most significant canopies on the official tree lists.
- Include some larger species from the 6' planter strip list to the 4-6' planter strip list where possible, or change the dimensions of planting strip requirements.
- Create larger planting spaces throughout the City where possible.
- Only remove and replace trees when an existing tree must be removed.
- Tree replacements should be planted as soon as possible.

As a result of the Beautification Commission's action and Council's consensus, staff prepared a Draft Themed Block List and Policy of Establishing a Themed Block, which was presented at the August 7, 2008, Beautification Commission meeting. The Themed Block List and Policy were approved at the September 4, 2008 Beautification Commission meeting. The policy included:

- The Beautification Commission will recommend "Themed Blocks" to the City Council.
- To petition the Beautification Commission for a new themed block, a property owner on a block shall gather signatures of at least 2/3 of the property owners.
- Forms for the "Petition" will be provided by the Parks and Recreation Department Office.
- Petitions shall be forwarded to the Beautification Commission for recommendation to the Council to establish a new "themed" block.
- If approved, staff will determine the species theme in collaboration with the property owners.
- Selected "themed" species will replace existing trees only when removing an existing tree is deemed necessary according to City policy.

Ninety-eight blocks were designated as Themed Blocks. Since then, the City and residents have added 24 Themed Blocks, bringing the total to 122 (Exhibit A).

The ability to remove a block from the Themed Block designation was added later. Presently, if a block would like to remove the Themed Block designation, 75% of property owners must agree to remove the entire block for the matter to be considered (Exhibit B).

Themed Blocks provide a benefit to the community by honoring the intended look of a developed area. Themed Blocks can create an aesthetic look and feel with a memorable uniformity. Themed Blocks can also face challenges, such as fast-spreading disease or insect infestations. Having a single species increases the likelihood that a single disease or insect will cause widespread tree loss, potentially devastating an entire block.

Additionally, requiring a large canopy tree due to a themed block designation in a location with confined growing space can create a continual conflict. This includes the tree being unable to grow to the typical species size due to overhead utilities. These trees cannot reach their intended size and require significant and frequent maintenance resources from the City and utility providers to reduce risk.

DISCUSSION

In January 2025, a resident of the 1600 block of Chapin Ave. applied for a Tree Work Plan Permit to remove City street trees in conjunction with sidewalk repairs. The resident expressed interest in planting a utility-friendly tree from the City's approved list of species for overhead primary-conductor utilities. The resident was informed that the area was designated as a Themed Block with *Platanus acerifolia* (London Planetree) as the required replacement. The resident was also informed that Themed Blocks and overhead utility conflicts would soon be discussed. However, after three public meetings, the Beautification Commission and City Council voted to support retaining the London planetree as the designated Themed Block species along the 1600 block of Chapin Ave. and at other locations throughout the City (Exhibit C).

Some property owners along 1600 Chapin Ave. have signed a petition to remove the Themed Block designation from this area. The resident submitted the attached petition on behalf of their neighbors. Staff have matched the signatures of property owners and found 86% of the property owners support the removal of the Themed Block designation (Exhibit D).

The area was originally planted with London Planetree; however, several alternative species have been planted, and some of the remaining London Planetrees are in poor health and require replacement.

The table below shows the actual species planted along 1600 Chapin Ave.

| | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Total Available Planting Sites | 28 |
| Vacancies | 3 |
| Theme Tree (London Planetree) | 8 |
| Theme Tree Requiring Replacement | 4 |
| Other Species | 14 |
| Other Species Planted Since 2012 | 8 (2017, 2019, 2022) |

Should the Commission approve the removal of the Themed Block designation for the 1600 block of Chapin Ave., residents would be sent one of two approved species lists, depending upon the presence of primary overhead electrical conductors (Exhibit E).

In preparation for the Thursday, December 4, 2025, Beautification Commission Meeting, the staff has noticed this subject via the City E-news, social media, and mailing to 7 property owners and tenants who live along the 1600 block of Chapin Ave.

FISCAL IMPACT

No fiscal impact is likely.

EXHIBITS

- A. Current Themed Block List
- B. Themed Block Policy Form
- C. Staff Report to City Council on Themed Blocks
- D. Petition from Property-Owners along 1600 Block of Chapin Ave.
- E. City Street Tree Lists for Planters less than 4' and Beneath Overhead Primary Conductors