



STAFF REPORT

To: Beautification Commission

Date: December 4, 2025

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

Subject: Consideration of Petition to Remove Themed Block Designation for the 1600 Block of McDonald Way

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 McDonald Way.

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 action and Council 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 October 2025, a resident of McDonald Way was informed that they could not select a tree from the City's official species list, as was previously erroneously promised to them by staff. It was discovered that McDonald Way was designated a Themed Block, and the only planting option is the Red Maple tree. The resident was surprised to find that the 1600 block of McDonald Way had multiple species planted over the last decade and lacked a common theme. The resident submitted the attached petition on behalf of their neighbors. Staff have matched the signatures of property owners and found that 86% property owners support the removal of the Themed Block designation. (EXHIBIT C).

Staff have researched the area's history. It appears that when the area was developed, the Liriodendron (Tulip Tree) was planted at most residences along this street. The Parks division no longer plants this tree due to susceptibility to aphids and significant root-infrastructure challenges. Between 2008 and 2016, the Red Maple tree became the chosen replacement species. However, the table below shows the actual species at 1600 McDonald Way.

Total Available Planting Sites	28
Vacancies	3
Original Theme Tree (Tulip Tree)	6
Replacement Theme Tree (Red Maple)	12
Other Species	7
Other Species Planted Since 2012	3 (2013, 2020, 2021)

Should the Beautification Commission approve the removal of the Themed Block designation for the 1600 block of McDonald Way, the property-owners would select the replacement street trees from the trees approved on the list for planting areas greater than 6'. (EXHIBIT D)

In preparation for the Thursday, December 4, 2025, Beautification Commission Meeting, staff have noticed this subject via the City E-news, social media, and mailing to 26 property owners and tenants that live along the 1600 block of McDonald Way.

FISCAL IMPACT

No fiscal impact is likely.

EXHIBITS

- A. Current Themed Block List
- B. Themed Block Policy Form
- C. Petition from Property-Owners along the 1600 Block of McDonald Way
- D. Street Tree Species List for Planters Greater Than 6'