

BURLINGAME BEAUTIFICATION COMMISSION
Draft Minutes May 1, 2025

The regularly scheduled meeting of the Beautification Commission was called to order at 6:30 p.m. by Chair Chu.

ROLL CALL

Present: Chair Chu, Commissioners Batte, Bauer, and Kirchner
Absent: Commissioner Damico
Staff: Parks Superintendent/City Arborist Holtz, Parks Supervisor Burow, and Recording Secretary Flores
Others: None

MINUTES

Commissioner Batte made a motion to approve the February 6, 2025, Regular Meeting minutes with corrections to Commissioner Kirchner's name. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Bauer and was approved. 4-0-1

City Arborist Holtz explained that page four of the March 6, 2025, draft minutes required a correction to Supervisor Burow's comments in the third paragraph to clarify that she referred to Redwood trees, not Cedar trees. It was later determined that the comment was made and would not be struck from the final approved minutes.

Commissioner Bauer made a motion to approve the March 6, 2025, Regular Meeting minutes with corrections to Commissioner Kirchner's name. The motion was seconded by Chair Chu and was approved. 4-0-1

CORRESPONDENCE

None

PUBLIC COMMENT

None

PRESENTATION

None

OLD BUSINESS

1. Discussion of Themed Block Utility Conflicts and Potential Revisions to the Theme Block Lists

Arborist Holtz provided a summary of previous discussions surrounding the topic of Themed Blocks. He presented the staff report and explained that approximately 600 themed block sites are under primary utilities, with large canopy species causing concern. He presented similar-looking alternative trees to the Red Maple, Red Oak, and London Plane trees, which would best mimic the intent of the themed blocks. The Shangtung Maple and Moosebark Maple would best mimic the Red Maple, although the Moosebark Maple is unavailable to source locally. The Shangtung Maple is available locally and available for viewing during the meeting. The Red Oak alternatives found were the Gambel Oak tree, available to be viewed during the meeting, and the Dwarf Chinkapin Oak, which cannot be sourced locally. Arborist Holtz

confirmed that although there are London Plane alternatives, such as the Alpens Globe or Mirkovec, none are available within the United States, and he is not confident we could source a suitable alternative moving forward. Further, he explained that the London Plane is the tree with a greater number of utility conflicts. They are also reaching an age where staff is seeing a lot more decay and branch failures and are being replaced with the Columbia species, which is vigorous and disease-resistant but has strong vertical growth. Utility interference can be seen as early as five years.

Arborist Holtz explained that the Commission could move to leave the current Themed Block list unchanged, allow property owners to individually select species from the Primary Utility Plant List for areas with large canopy trees in utility conflict, or approve a species for the locations under utilities.

Commissioner Batte asked whether a themed block must have only one species or if it can have more than one. Arborist Holtz stated that historically, the City has designated one dominant species per themed block. A change can be proposed by the Commission and presented to the City Council for approval.

Chair Chu open Public Comment.

Cathy Baylock, a Newlands Avenue resident, spoke in favor of keeping the Themed Block List unchanged for Sycamore specific blocks. She argued that PG&E has done a good job keeping the trees under utilities maintained and out of their infrastructure. Also, she stated that larger canopy trees are necessary for wider streets such as Newlands Avenue and Occidental Avenue. Lastly, she spoke of the Deodar Cedars in the City of Altadena, which were not damaged during the recent fires. She explained that Deodar Cedars are very low in flammability.

Jennifer Pfaff, a Burlingame resident, said she liked the Shangtung Maple and Gambel Oak trees presented at the meeting. If she had to pick from either as a Sycamore alternative, she would prefer the Shangtung Maple tree, although she was in favor of leaving the Sycamore trees alone as they currently are. Further, she spoke of her concern with possible changes to areas that are not affected by utility conflicts and urged the Commission to ensure that if an alternate is proposed, it is only for tree sites directly in conflict with utilities. All other sites on that block remain as the original themed species.

Chair Chu closed Public Comment and Commission discussion ensued.

Commissioner Bauer asked for clarification on the alternatives for the three trees posing utility conflicts on themed blocks. Arborist Holtz confirmed that the Shangtung Maple tree is the Red Maple alternate that could be sourced locally; the Gambel Oak is the alternative species to the Red Oak tree that could be sourced locally; and in the staff's opinion, there is no viable option locally available as a London Plane alternative. Arborist Holtz referred back to public comment and confirmed that the residents who spoke suggested that they liked the Shangtung Maple as an alternative to the London Plane tree and the Red Maple tree if they had to pick one. He explained that the staff focused on locating alternatives that would most resemble the current themed species but that the Commission may choose to pick any alternative that they see fit. Commissioner Bauer stated that she is inclined to move forward with the smaller alternate species for areas in utility conflict, specifically the Shantung Maple and Gambel Oak, and not recommend an alternative for the London Plane tree.

The Commissioners took a closer look at the two alternatives physically present at the meeting.

Commissioner Kirchner confirmed that the Commission is tasked with making a recommendation that will be presented to the City Council for final review. Arborist Holtz confirmed that if a change is recommended, staff will bring it to the Council for review and approval. Commissioner Kirchner inquired whether the Commission could also recommend no change to Council. Arborist Holtz confirmed.

Chair Chu asked whether any commonly available trees have bark that resembles the London Plane trees. Arborist Holtz stated that the Chinese Elm tree has a modeled bark appearance but that the leaf structure is very different and would not look the same as the London Plane tree.

Commissioner Bauer made a motion to modify the Themed Block plantings that create utility conflicts by designating the Shangtung Maple tree as the alternative species for the Red Maple Themed Blocks for locations in conflict, designating the Gambel Oak tree as the alternative species for Red Oak Themed Blocks for locations in conflict; and that there be no change to the London Plane tree designated Themed Blocks. The motion was seconded by Chair Chu and was approved. 4-0-1

NEW BUSINESS

1. Public Hearing to Consider an Appeal of the City Arborist's Denial of the Removal of a Protected Private Tree at 1320 Vancouver Ave.

Chair Chu reviewed the Order of Business for Appeals.

Arborist Holtz presented the staff report. He explained that staff received an application for the removal of two private protected trees. The Deodar Cedar tree was approved for removal due to poor form and performance of the species. The form is poor due to its location under utilities. When reviewing the Coastal Redwood tree, Arborist Holtz did not believe it met the threshold for removal. The Applicant presented photographic evidence of limb failures, an independent arborist report recommending the removal of both trees, and a letter of support from the adjacent neighbor to the south of the property.

Arborist Holtz explained his observations differed from those presented by the independent Arborist. He stated that both he and the independent Arborist performed level 2 inspections from the ground, and a level 3 inspection would involve someone going up either in a bucket, climbing, or with a drone to take photographs and inspect the attachments closer. Further, he stated that he would characterize the "cavity" at the base as a wound that has healed. He stated that a major factor taken into consideration is the impact the removal would have on the neighborhood. Due to the approval of the other tree on the property, removing the Redwood tree would significantly impact the neighborhood. Arborist Holtz also stated that pruning practices do not weaken the attachment of a branch existing on the tree, but rather, the re-growth post pruning may be weakly attached and cause the failure of smaller branches. Lastly, he did not find any evidence of root damage. When there is no obvious evidence of structural damage, a structural engineer's report would typically be required, and the Applicant did not provide one. He stated that the Applicant expressed frustration due to safety concerns for themselves and their guests and possible liability due to their neighbor's safety. Arborist Holtz explained that the tree had been recently pruned, which reduces the likelihood of limb failure even though the regrowth could be more weakly attached. The Applicant would like the Commission to reconsider the City's position.

Chair Chu opened Public Comment. Seeing none, he closed Public Comment and opened the floor to the Appellant to present to the Commission.

Appellant and property owner Larisa Khapchik presented her appeal and concerns to the Commission. Ms. Khapchik explained that she has lived in the home for over 25 years and has enjoyed the trees for many years. She spoke of the concerns brought on by climate change. She has been experiencing increased falling limbs within the last two years, causing more concerns and anxiety during storm and wind events. She expressed fears of possible harm to her family and neighbors who have spoken out. Ms. Khapchik stated that she would be delighted to plant new trees at the recommendation of the Commission upon removing the others. She stated that the denial of the removal of the Redwood tree is unjustified, as the tree poses a dangerous and immediate threat to life safety. She stated that her removal request meets the criteria outlined under chapter 11.06.060 and that as she and her husband approach retirement, they cannot afford the necessary pruning the tree requires.

Commissioner discussion ensued.

Commissioner Bauer inquired further about the split in the tree approximately 80 feet up and whether City staff would go up to inspect at a closer proximity. Arborist Holtz confirmed that City staff does not provide assessments on private trees; they only evaluate site conditions compared to what the code references to make a determination. The financial burden of hiring a company to evaluate the tree further would fall on the property owner and Applicant. Further, he clarified that a co-dominant leader could occur in nature, and U-shape attachment is generally stronger attached than a V-shape. The tree in question does appear V-shaped but would warrant further inspection. He explained that the Deodar Cedar that was approved due to poor structure and poor form and the species pre-disposition to shed large branches in maturity. This would have been considered if Coastal Redwood trees had a propensity for failure.

Commissioner Kirchner asked whether a lack of water lends to limb failures. Arborist Holtz confirmed that a lack of water or drought stress could lead to limb failure, although he also noted that the roots can grow out hundreds of feet in search of a water source.

Commissioner Batte asked whether an inspection of the split section would be required to change the City's determination. Arborist Holtz stated that the professional's level 3 assessment would be taken into consideration, and he would take the professional's opinion at its word. Staff would not be climbing to verify, nor would the City hire a company. Commissioner Bauer asked about possible costs for further inspections. Arborist Holtz confirmed that an additional aerial inspection and structural reports would be costly. Commissioner Kirchner did not find that the Coastal Redwood tree met the characteristics outlined in the tree ordinance as reasons for removal. Chair Chu shared the same opinion and stated that as Commissioners, they put a lot of weight on the City Arborist's determination of the low probability of branch failure. Although he sympathized with the Applicant, he must maintain an objective view of the facts presented. He does not support overturning the City Arborist's decision.

Commissioner Bauer voiced her sympathy towards Ms. Khapchik and her fears but understands that the Commission has guidelines to follow when reviewing tree removal appeals and did not believe enough evidence had been provided to warrant overturning the City Arborist's decision, absent further investigation with an aerial inspection.

Commissioner Batte asked for clarification on whether an aerial inspection would sway the Arborist's decision. Arborist Holtz confirmed that more information provided in the form of a structural report or aerial report would be considered. He stated that he did not visually see the evidence to support what was claimed in the independent arborist report provided.

Chair Chu allotted one minute for the Applicant to provide further comment. Ms. Khapchik remained in her seat and further commented away from the microphone. Her comments pertained to previous structural damage caused to her neighbor's property due to the Coastal Redwood tree in question.

Commissioner Bauer made a motion to uphold the City Arborist's decision to deny the request to remove the protected private Coastal Redwood tree at 1320 Vancouver Avenue. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Kirchner and was approved. 4-0-1

2. Review and Discussion of the Feasibility of Reactivating the Adopt-a-Tree Program

Supervisor Burow presented the staff report. She explained that the Parks Division currently has 1,279 tree sites on the in-house Watering List, with staff watering 50-70 trees per day by a part-time employee dedicated solely to watering. She explained that challenges with the Adopt-a-Tree Program experienced along with neighboring municipalities are the number of volunteers, accountability of those volunteers, checking the work being completed, location of trees, and supplying water. In her research of other jurisdictions and tree programs, those cities found more success with allowing residents to adopt trees adjacent to their property only and letting residents choose the tree species planted adjacent to their property. Supervisor Burow suggested that a better approach to get residents involved is to utilize the City's website to more clearly and effectively inform the community of the importance and benefits of watering trees and how best to get involved.

Commissioner Kirchner stated that although a tree watering program is a good idea in theory, it would be more difficult in practice. He shared with the Commissioners a copy of the Tree Noticing Postcard he received. He asked if residents received any information about young tree care when they received a new tree adjacent to their property. Supervisor Burow confirmed that a door hanger with the tree species they received and tree care tips are provided for every new tree planted in front of or on the side of a residence.

Commissioner Batte suggested a concise mass mail postcard educating the community on watering trees. Due to the cost of a new postcard and mass mail in mind, Chair Chu suggested adding watering info to an existing postcard notification that has already been sent out for other purposes. He also stated that he would hesitate to water his neighbor's trees or haul water to other destinations for tree-watering purposes. He wondered if communicating to the public that these volunteers exist and are performing the work would minimize the unease of the situation. Commissioner Batte brought up the point of acquiring volunteers through school community service hours. She stated that she favored motivating residents to water the trees near their properties so that City staff could focus on trees not located in residential areas. She inquired if the majority of the trees on the City's watering list are in residential areas. Supervisor Burow confirmed they were in front of or adjacent to a residential property.

Arborist Holtz outlined the current communication regarding newly planted trees and believes there are opportunities for direct communication and engagement with residents to emphasize the importance of tree watering further. Information has been included in the weekly e-News as well.

Commissioner Batte stated her belief that more education and community engagement on watering trees in front of their property would be a better approach than an Adopt-a-Tree program.

Chair Chu opened Public Comment.

Jennifer Pfaff spoke of her experience watering the El Camino Real trees and the difficulty of completing such a task as a volunteer having to provide water and transportation. She spoke of volunteering with CBB and the Adopt-a-Planter program and the amount of work that goes into volunteering. She advised against relying on a volunteer program to complete the essential task of watering trees.

Chair Chu inquired if there is a way to reduce possible friction when approaching other residents about taking better care of their trees and ensuring they are being watered. He suggested printed material that one neighbor can provide another, accessible through the City website.

Commissioner Batte suggested a social media campaign encouraging residents to water trees. Commissioner Bauer summarized that based on experience and research acquired from other cities, an Adopt-a-Tree program may not be feasible. Chair Chu suggested adding a watermark to the current Tree Notice postcard to remind residents to water trees.

3. Award of Arbor Day Poster Competition

Secretary Flores presented the posters that were submitted in response to the 2025 Arbor Day Poster Competition. She explained that the winning artwork would be the 2026 Arbor Day celebration invitation.

By unanimous decision, the Commission chose poster 7 as the winner.

REPORTS

Commissioner Kirchner provided an update on the landscape awards and shared the zone map with his fellow Commissioners. Commissioners signed up for their desired zone: Commissioner Kirchner Zone 1, Commissioner Batte Zone 2, Chair Chu Zone 3, Commissioner Bauer Zone 4, and Commissioner Damico Zone 5. Commissioner Bauer clarified that the Commissioners are responsible for nominating two sites for each award category.

Arborist Holtz reported on approving an emergency Cypress tree removal in active failure at Mercy High School. Further, he recently reported on the large number of unauthorized work on protected-sized trees. He explained that penalties and fees collected from the unauthorized tree work would be allocated for planting new trees throughout the City.

Supervisor Burow reported that the final two removals on Easton Drive were scheduled for May 6 and 9, 2025.

Secretary Flores reported the Laguna Park Playground Renovation Project was nearing completion. She stated that there were two tentative ribbon-cutting dates and that more information would be sent to the Commission once a date is finalized.

UPCOMING AGENDA ITEMS

None

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 8:10 p.m. The next Beautification Commission meeting is scheduled for June 5, 2025.

Respectfully submitted,

Veronica Flores

Veronica Flores

Recording Secretary