



Staff Liaison
Stephen Prée | 510-559-7685
spree@ci-el-cerrito.ca.us

AGENDA

REGULAR MEETING OF THE URBAN FOREST COMMITTEE

Monday February 12, 2024, at 7:00 p.m.

El Cerrito City Hall
City Council Chambers
10890 San Pablo Avenue
El Cerrito, CA 94530

This Meeting Place is Wheelchair Accessible

7:00 p.m. CONVENE REGULAR MEETING

- 1. ROLL CALL** - Chair Robert Hrubes; Vice-Chair Robin Mitchell; Members, Cathy Bleier, Catherine (Cassie) Hughes, Jennifer Kaczor, Yan Linhart
- 2. ORAL COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE PUBLIC and INTRODUCTION BY INDIVIDUALS INTERESTED IN SERVING ON THE ADVISORY BOARD**
Remarks are typically limited to three minutes per person and may be on anything within the subject matter jurisdiction of the body. Remarks on non-agenda items will be heard first, remarks on agenda items will be heard at the time the item is discussed.
- 3. COMMITTEE MEMBER ANNOUNCEMENTS / CHANGES TO THE MEETING AGENDA** (10 minutes)
- 4. CITY COUNCIL / STAFF LIAISONS ANNOUNCEMENTS AND REPORTS-** (5 minutes) City Council Liaison and / or City Staff may report on Council policies, priorities, and significant actions taken by the City Council, and / or matters of general interest to the Urban Forest Committee (UFC).
- 5. APPROVAL OF MINUTES-** Consider a motion to adopt the minutes from the January 8, 2024, UFC meeting. (3 minutes)
- 6. PRESENTATION: ELEMENTS OF MUNICIPAL URBAN FORESTRY** (30 min.)
Receive a presentation on common and unique elements of selected municipal forestry programs from Daniel Gallagher, Retired City of Berkeley Senior Forestry Supervisor and Tony Wolcott, Retired City of Albany Urban Forester.
- 7. COLLABORATION WITH THE ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY COMMITTEE-** (3 minutes) Hear updates, participate in discussion, and consider possible action items regarding collaborating with the EQC.
- 8. COLLABORATION WITH THE PARK AND RECREATION COMMISSION-** (3 minutes) Hear updates, participate in discussion, and consider possible action items regarding collaborating with the PRC.

9. URBAN FOREST COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES, CALENDAR, AND WORK PLAN

Hear updates, participate in discussion, and consider possible actions that correspond with development of the Urban Forest Committee Work Plan and calendar of events. (60 minutes)

A. Arbor Day 2024- (Hughes & Linhart)

B. PG&E Moeser Lane Tree Removal Communication- (Kaczor, Mitchell)

10. ITEMS FROM TONIGHT'S MEETING THAT REQUIRE FURTHER ACTION

(5 minutes)

11. FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS- hear committee member suggestions for future UFC meeting items (5 minutes)

- Arbor Week 2024
- Work Plan Update
- Urban Forestry Grants and Fundraising (Hrubes, Kaczor, Mitchell)

12. ADJOURNMENT

In compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, if you need special assistance to participate in this meeting, please contact the Staff Liaison, 510-559-7685. Notification 48 hours prior to the meeting will enable the City to make reasonable arrangements to ensure accessibility to this meeting. (28 CFR 35.102-35.104 ADA Title I).

Any writings or documents provided to a majority of the members regarding any item on this agenda will be made available for public inspection at El Cerrito Recycling Center during normal business hours.

Moeser Lane PG&E Tree Removal UFC letter

Overview

The City of El Cerrito's Urban Forest Committee (UFC) would like to raise our concerns to the City Council's attention regarding PG&E's removal of a number of healthy, mature Coast Live Oaks and underlying vegetation from the upper part of Moeser Lane last year, and PG&E's lack of communication to the City or the public about its plans to do so. In addition to the UFC's concerns, residents in the area have also expressed their dissatisfaction to the City over PG&E's actions.

The UFC encourages the City Council to contact PG&E and request:

- A written response providing details regarding the apparent necessity of the tree removal that occurred in June 2023
- Future *a priori* (before the fact) communications from PG&E to the City of El Cerrito for any tree removal plans, prior to execution
- Mitigation plans to accompany any tree removal plans going forward

Background

For the past 10 years, PG&E has regularly notified City staff about its plans for vegetation management on its Moeser Lane easement. City staff have consistently encouraged PG&E to remove as few mature oaks as possible and to achieve safety standards through tree pruning, not removal. Every year, City staff have inquired about PG&E's mitigation plans: What could be done to mitigate the removal of native habitat? What could be replanted? Each year, the response was noncommittal. (At times, PG&E has removed natives [Redbud and Toyon] and left non-natives [Cotoneaster and Bottlebrush].)

In 2023, PG&E notified City staff of its plans for tree removal. But for the first time, PG&E did not specify what kind of trees (or their sizes) were to be removed, even when specifically prompted via email by City staff. City staff estimates approximately a dozen Coast Live Oaks greater than 10 inches in diameter were removed, again with no mitigation plan. City staff shared their concern about potential erosion and a loss of habitat, as communicated to the PG&E team numerous times in the past. Again, PG&E's response to the City's request for a revegetation plan was to discuss options in the future.

For added context: Three years ago, the City received a request from a nearby resident about trees that were interfering with her view. City staff and PG&E met with the resident and they came up with a pruning plan, which was conducted. This year, a complaint was filed again, and City staff put this same resident in touch with PG&E and indicated the City's preference to prune instead of removal.

While the UFC understands the need to prioritize public safety concerns regarding wildfire and to minimize wildfire risks, it is the UFC's view that the removal of these trees and the lack of revegetation plans are combined actions that are not up to the City's urban forest management standards, as described in its Urban Forest Management Plan. It's understood that utility companies are required to maintain regulated minimum clearance distances from high voltage power lines. However, without documentation demonstrating otherwise it is the UFC's view that the removal of trees was excessive, and the lack of a mitigation plan is unacceptable.

Coast Live Oaks, fire resistance, and risks of removal

According to the USDA Forest Service's Fire Effects Information System: "Coast Live Oak is exceptionally fire resistant, more so than other California oak species." The trees on Moeser include particularly large specimens of up to 50 inches in diameter, whose size and thick bark add to their fire resistance.

These trees provide a wide range of benefits and constitute an important investment in our City's green infrastructure in terms of GHG reduction and climate effects mitigation, water quality, habitat values, and aesthetics (quality of life). According to the Forest Service's Climate Change Resource Center's I-Tree Calculator, just one 20-inch Coast Live Oak in this neighborhood stores over 7,000 lbs of CO₂ (released upon cutting), and also avoids over 1,000 gallons of runoff, which is especially critical for preventing erosion on Moeser's steep gradient. Coast Live Oaks are also one of our most valuable native species for birds, pollinators, and other wildlife.

Response from El Cerrito residents

El Cerrito resident Robin Winton contacted City staff in July 2023 when she first saw the oak removal. Staff put her in touch with PG&E, who responded within 24 hours to address her concerns. Per Ms. Winton, the PG&E representative told her he was a little surprised himself about the work, that it seemed different than usual, and that he wasn't there when it happened. He assured her there wasn't any more work planned for the season, and that height compliance work of 30-foot vertical separation between wires and treetops would resume in Q1 or Q2 of calendar year 2024. Ms. Winton is concerned that the other oaks in the area are vulnerable, as she estimates that the oaks that were removed were probably about the same height as the ones remaining. Ms. Winton stresses that in the past PG&E did a great job with tree pruning and clean-up.

Additionally, in 2019, Cathy Bleier, UFC member and former manager of oak conservation and fire planning programs for CALFIRE, wrote an email to PG&E as a resident and member of the public. Addressed to the PG&E vegetation program manager responsible for the Moeser easement, she expressed her concerns about the removal of healthy, mature Coast Live Oaks from the upper part of Moeser Lane. PG&E's response expressed appreciation for her email and a request to consider other factors related to removing trees that are incompatible with power lines, and described required practices for vegetation management within areas identified as a High Fire Threat District (HFTD).

In conclusion

As stated above, the Urban Forest Committee requests that the City Council contact PG&E for the purpose of securing a written report regarding the necessity of the removal of Coast Live Oaks from the Moeser Avenue easement lands in June 2023, rather than pruning to the appropriate height to meet the PG&E requirements. The UFC also asks that the City Council requests of PG&E timely communications and mitigation plans for any future tree removal plans prior to execution going forward, as well as mitigation plans for the trees already removed.

Thank you,
Urban Forest Committee