

Mayor to Citizens: Shut Up About Trees

Salem's Mayor, Anna Peterson, has revealed her disdain for clean government, transparent decision-making, and citizen involvement.

Here's some background.

Almost two years ago — on June 23, 2013 — U.S. Bank and the City of Salem cut down the last of five large, healthy, beautiful Japanese Zelkova trees in the downtown Historic District for no good reason.

This outrageous action sparked well-deserved protests.

After all, the City's own Urban Forester and Shade Tree Advisory Committee had recommended that the trees be pruned, not removed. Independent expert arborists agreed. Neighboring downtown businesses and residents urged saving the trees, as did many others who loved them.

Including me.

I know a lot about this debacle, which involved an unethical backroom deal between Peter Fernandez, the Public Works Director, and Ryan Allbritton, the U.S. Bank president, to have the trees removed even before an application was submitted to the City.

My 2014 report on the tree killings, which was based on extensive public records requests, can be read at www.usbankkillstrees.com. Neither City officials nor U.S. Bank challenged any of the damning facts in the report.

The indefensible U.S. Bank tree removals led to the formation of a broad-based committee charged with coming up with revisions to the City's street tree ordinance.

After much work this committee presented its recommendations to Mayor Peterson and the City Council on March 9.

Watching a CCTV video of this work session, I was shocked at the disrespect Peterson showed to the committee and Salem's citizens. Her remarks spoke volumes about how the Mayor favors special interests over the broad community interest.

The U.S. Bank trees were cut down because the final decision was made by Public Works Director Fernandez. The public records I got showed that lower-level City staff recognized how businesses exert “political pressure” on tree removal requests.

So the committee advised that an Urban Tree Commission be the final decider after the City’s Urban Forester and Public Works Director make their recommendations.

Mayor Peterson didn’t like that notion.

Illogically, she said that because the City Council hires the “right” City Manager, who chooses the “right” directors, who hire the “correct” people to work under them, “right” decisions are going to be made.

Wow, back to the middle ages.

It’s Salem’s version of the Divine Right of Kings. Obey, citizen peasants. Do not question the authority of Exalted Emperor Peterson and her functionaries who supposedly always make perfect street tree decisions.

The Mayor asked whether we want to be a community that encourages the public to get involved in decisions that affect people, like whether there is a good reason for certain trees on public property to be removed.

Most Salemians would answer, absolutely!

But Peterson desires less, rather than more, citizen involvement. “I want less live theatre on these policy issues,” she said.

Well, this explains a lot. If you’ve ever felt like top City officials don’t care about what you think, they’re just following their Mayor’s lead.

Strange Up Salem seeks to lift our city’s Blah Curse. Give us a Facebook like. Brian Hines blogs at hinesblog.com