

# Salem considers Urban Tree Commission to protect street trees

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In 2013, the Salem City Council believed there was a problem with the tree code. Problems had arisen when city-owned street trees were removed from outside a U.S. Bank at 302 State Street and many Salem residents protested.

So council members and city staff set out to rework the code and remove any perceived confusion. City staff and a citizen advisory committee collaborated for more than two years looking for solutions.

And they believed they found one big solution: creation of an Urban Tree Commission.

There's one problem.

Salem Mayor Anna Peterson is opposed to the creation of the commission. In her remarks at a recent council meeting, Peterson cited costs and recruitment to explain her opposition.

"I see hours and hours of staff time. I am determined that this council will stop bleeding money," Peterson said.

Peterson said an existing body could do the work of the proposed commission.

The Urban Tree Commission is one of numerous suggestions in the 15 pages of draft rules the committee and city staff recommended to the City Council. The draft lays out protocol for when city-owned trees can and cannot be removed. For example: trees along streets considered a nuisance by private property owners due to the trees dropping leaves or obstructing views would be protected.

The proposed rules would allow for a number of reasons for possible tree removal. Trees dying or interfering with a construction project could be taken down. Trees damaging infrastructure such as sidewalks could also be removed if the problem can't be fixed by other measures.

The recommendation with the most impact, however, is the proposed Urban Tree Commission. The commission would have more far reaching authority than the current group overseeing street tree issues, the Shade Tree Advisory Committee. The commission would only have jurisdiction on city-owned trees and no authority over trees growing on private property. And it could not delve into disputes over removing trees in the way of public works projects, such as road or utility improvements.

The council appeared paralyzed about the issue at its June 8 meeting; councilors declined to vote on the creation of an Urban Tree Commission. Instead, they set a tentative September date for a public hearing.

In the interim, city staff will begin a public outreach campaign, which will include meeting with neighborhood associations.

The public might not need much outreach, as numerous citizens expressed support for the proposed commission at the June 8 meeting.

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