

January 11, 2014

LA City Councilman Mike Bonin
City Hall
200 N. Spring Hall, Room 475
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Re: Council File #14-0019 – Street Tree Policies and Guidelines

Dear Councilmember Bonin;

As is the case of many large, urban centers, Los Angeles has changed dramatically in just the last decade. Exponential growth, a vast increase in the number of people and cars; all of these contribute to the challenges faced by the City and its vision for growth.

The future of the City's green spaces and wildlife is a part of those challenges – and that vision. The natural populations of birds and wildlife, all of which are adapted to live in close proximity with their human counterparts are affected as never before by the growth of the City and as such, are critically dependent upon an environment that many take for granted. Nowhere is this felt more acutely than in the case of the urban birds, and particularly the urban raptors: the hawks and owls that live amongst us.

Our native hawks and owls do not constitute a menace to pets or people. They feed upon what many cities justifiably deem pest species: rats, pigeons, squirrels, ground squirrels, and crows. Pest species displace natural birds and animals that are important for diversity. Hawks and owls require very tall trees, from 40 to well over 80 feet, with good cover for their nests (our native Great Horned Owls do not build nests; they use those abandoned by other large birds, so if a 'non-active' nest is removed during trimming, there goes the owl's breeding nest for that season). Maintaining healthy hawk and owl populations is as simple as allowing mature growth of trees and drastically reducing or *eliminating* tall tree trimming completely, unless a tree has died.

These birds are the natural predators of rodents. Keeping our urban hawks and owls is pest control at an ideal level; it costs the City nothing, controls species that are too numerous, and does not use poisons that can kill pets, harm children and adults, and endanger water supplies. The use of poison must be eliminated City- wide; there are no safe poisons for our natural wildlife, and much research has shown that rodents will continue to develop immunity to poison. All studies indicate that conventional simple traps, cleaning up trash and closing containers can effectively bring rodent populations down to levels that the natural predators – hawks and owls – can handle them. *The tall trees, shrubs, and ivy along the Metro Rail line must not be removed.* These trees and shrubs are currently active breeding and hunting territory for local native hawks and owls; the use of *any* poison along the Metro Rail will go immediately

into the raptor food chain and will kill birds that have been using this area for food for many breeding seasons.

There are few requirements for hawks and owls to breed successfully: the presence of food and good breeding habitats found in mature, tall trees, well foliated with strong lateral branches for adults and young to use while fledging from the nest. Our hawks and owls are protected at the State and Federal level. We must also protect their habitat. *The nest in a breeding tree is not the habitat – the tree is the habitat.* If trees are topped, or decimated from trimming, it effectively removes the entire habitat for a minimum of several seasons. The majority of young hawks and owls do not survive their first year; if adults cannot breed and add more young to our communities, this allows surges in the populations of our pest species. Trimming during the breeding cycle, which starts in late December and extends through the fledging of young in July can be disastrous to our native raptors and most other birds. Many of the guidelines that have been used in the past to address habitat and its protection are archaic. They simply do not address the needs of the modern city or its urban birds; the simple presence or absence of eggs in an apparently ‘unused’ nest should *never* be used to decide that a large, tall, mature tree should be trimmed – these tall breeding trees are sensitive habitat for seven months of the year.

Trimming has other serious effects. The City is growing; in population, in the sheer number of cars. The need for street shade is paramount; it is well established that tree shade can be decisive in significantly lowering the heat of city summers, thus lowering yearly energy costs. The importance of allowing trees to reach mature status and reducing trimming can be seen every day; our native song birds and other wildlife cannot feed or breed in areas that are trimmed – there is simply not enough cover nor food for them to do so.

It is relatively easy to determine whether a large, tall tree is being used for breeding; there are clear signs that indicate the continued use of nest trees, even over successive years. It is possible to trim a breeding tree to maintain the habitat; not all trees are breeding habitats for our owls and hawks, only very specific ones. These trees are sensitive habitats and must be treated as sensitive habitats; they fall into a different category than ‘just another maple’. Many residents are aware that hawks and owls are breeding in their trees and in the City’s parkway trees. There are local researchers who are studying these birds in their urban habitats; they are ready to be available for the City’s use. Those individuals should be allowed to assist the City if a sensitive habitat is under consideration for trimming; it is vital to the City that it not ignore those who are already working to maintain habitat – our input is important. It was in October of this last year that I tried to save a Red Tailed Hawk nest tree; the City had scheduled to be trimmed a very tall eucalyptus at the corner of Selby and Queensland Avenues in West Los Angeles. This tree had been used by no fewer than three mated pairs of Red Tailed Hawks over a period of more than seven years successively; I was in my third year of study of this nest site. Despite my best efforts and on the express orders of a City representative, the tree was trimmed extensively and most of the cover foliage removed. After this event, the most recent pair of breeding hawks inspected the tree; they have not returned to rebuild the nest and to this date, have apparently abandoned this tree for the first time in memory. Over the years, and to the delight of the children in the neighborhood, at least

eight young birds have come from Red Tailed Hawks nesting in this tree; the loss of this breeding tree is one that is all the more tragic because it was completely avoidable and unnecessary.

Los Angeles is a world-class urban center. It will continue to expand. As it does, the needs of its residents must be addressed, whether those residents are human or, as is the case with world-class urban centers worldwide – the natural wildlife, that has managed to adapt to our presence, can thrive in close proximity to our homes and cars, and provides a valuable learning experience to our children. Our green spaces are important. Our mature, tall trees are vital to our growth, to our future, and to the future of all our residents, and their families.

Thank you, Mr. Bonin for your bringing this discussion to committee and for your consideration in this regard.

Respectfully,

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Cc: Mayor Eric Garcetti
Council President Herb Wesson, Jr.
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