



Establishing a Vibrant Downtown Tree Canopy: A Practical Approach to Planning and Implementation

Issue: Citywide Tree Requirements Applied To Downtown

Citywide tree requirements are applied to Downtown projects, which cannot accommodate required trees on the project sites due to lot size limitations. In addition, most Downtown projects are built with limited or no setback areas for ground-level open areas in which trees can be planted. Because the Downtown Design Guide is now interpreted more strictly than it has been in the past, projects are now prevented from obtaining tree variances.

Solution: Adopt Downtown-Specific Tree Requirements With More Flexibility

Tree requirements should be amended to take into account the amount of open space provided on project sites. Rather than requiring one tree for every four dwelling units, Downtown projects could be required to provide a number of trees proportional to the amount of exterior open space provided. For example, 1 tree for every 500 square feet of exterior open space.

Issue: No Mechanism In Place To Facilitate Off-Site Plantings

Although the Downtown Design Guide does not permit tree variances, it does allow the tree requirement to be satisfied with off-site plantings on nearby streets or in public parks. However, the necessary mechanisms have not been put in place to facilitate off-site plantings.

Solution: Establish A Downtown Tree Bank To Facilitate Off-Site Plantings

Projects that cannot satisfy their tree requirement on-site should be given the option of paying a fee toward off-site tree plantings identified in an established Downtown Tree Bank. The fee should be based on the calculated costs of planting a tree and maintain it for a period of 5 years - the length of time necessary for trees to endure "transplant shock" and develop a mature root system. In accordance with the Downtown Design Guide, the Downtown Tree Bank should take into account the number of empty tree wells that exist in Downtown, in addition to trees needed in public parks and along the LA River. We encourage the City to use Business Improvement Districts in the Downtown area to assist with this work through the use of Memorandums of Agreement. Some area BIDs have already begun a tree survey but implementation is not possible without endorsement and assistance from City Departments.

Issue: Lack of Funds for Maintenance Of The Existing Canopy

Given budgetary constraints, tree trimmings and maintenance of the existing canopy has been sporadic. This has resulted in poor sidewalk conditions hampering the pedestrian environment. Despite this, however, the City continues to require new tree plantings without allocating corresponding maintenance funds. This will only lead to further deterioration of the existing tree canopy and ensures that new trees will not thrive.

Solution: Accept Funds For Maintenance Of The Existing Trees, Including Sidewalk Repair

In a Downtown environment emphasizing pedestrian orientation, it might be more fruitful for the City to also accept funds toward street tree maintenance and sidewalk repair, in lieu of requiring new tree planting. Projects that cannot satisfy their tree requirement on-site should also be given the option of paying a fee toward a maintenance fund. The fee should be equal to the cost of the tree planting and maintenance that would otherwise be required. The fund could then be used for sidewalk repair, expansion of tree wells, replacement of sick or dying trees, regular tree trimming and other related programs. This flexibility will ensure that the City will have enough funding for regular maintenance of the Downtown tree canopy thus promoting a thriving, pedestrian-friendly environment. We encourage the City to use Business Improvement Districts in the Downtown area to assist with this work through the use of Memorandums of Agreement. These BIDs already provide these services to their area property owners and can be more cost-effective in their implementation as well as more efficient than the City in handling uneven workload demands.

Issue: Dual Public Hearing Process Causes Confusion And Wastes Precious City Resources

Landscape plans for development proposals are reviewed and approved during the Planning Department entitlement process. Thereafter, projects are required to again apply for tree removal permits. The second time, a public hearing is conducted before the Board of Public Works even though the project has already been entitled and approved. This leads to much confusion in the community and leads to public mistrust about the public hearing process. Further, City resources are wasted processing duplicative permits, preparing corresponding staff reports, and conducting lengthy public hearings.

Solution: Amend The Public Hearing Process So That Tree Removals Are Considered And Permitted Concurrently With Entitlement Review

Amending the public hearing process to allow concurrent review will ensure that City time and resources are not spent revisiting plans that have already been approved by another body. The savings realized by streamlining these duplicative approvals and permits will then allow City staff and Commissioners to focus on other priorities.

Issue: Lack Of Coordination Leads To Inconsistency

Currently, streetscape plans are regularly modified due to Public Works requirements identified very late in the process. As a result, physical improvements constructed are regularly inconsistent with the design promised to the community during entitlement review. This leads to public mistrust about the public hearing and development process, and resultant streetscape plans are only partially complete.

Solution: Improve Coordination Between Planning And Public Works Bureaus

With more early input and better coordination between Planning and Public Works Bureaus, that streetscape plans can be implemented and constructed in the manner they were originally designed and approved. To ensure consistency, feedback regarding Public Works spacing requirements and other streetscape elements should be weighed and compared to the requirements already set by the Planning Department as part of the Downtown Design Guide.