

An Opinion: Let City Officials Know What You Think About Downtown Trees

By Scott Laird

The City of Vernonia recently acted on its promise to remove all of the trees lining the downtown corridor and as expected, some people are not happy about it.

While it might seem like the City acted rashly in removing the trees, this is an issue that has been discussed at length over time and the decision to move forward was done with forethought and planning. While the complete removal of the downtown trees may feel final to many citizens, the City Council has not yet determined a plan for moving forward and how they might, or might not, choose to replace the trees.

Since there appears to be many differing opinions about the determinations and actions of the City, this situation now provides a perfect opportunity for citizen involvement in our community affairs. It's an excellent occasion for citizens to participate in City decision making, and witness and play a role in representative government.

Opportunities to directly impact or sway the decisions of our elected officials, whether at the national, state, or local level, are always available to us, whether it's appearing personally, writing letters and emails, making phone calls, or commenting on social media. This situation offers a somewhat unique opportunity to have a say in a decision that impacts you. Often citizens don't have all the information needed, or the time to do the research to fully understand what is behind the scenes in a governmental decision, but this is a bit different. You have an opportunity to give your opinion and be heard by your elected officials and that opinion does matter in this instance.

The City Council has been wrestling with what to do about the streetscape of the downtown for several years now, after it was brought to the City's attention that sidewalks were being damaged and business signage was being blocked from view.

The trees in question were planted in 1999 as part of a downtown beautification project that included replacing sidewalks, but the tree species, once planted, did not perform the way the City anticipated. They have been growing larger than originally promised,

have required more annual maintenance than expected, and have the potential to damage infrastructure that was installed underneath the sidewalks on the south side of Bridge Street, including water and natural gas lines.

Those concerns led the City Council to instruct then City Administrator Gian Paolo Mammone to come up with a plan for how to replace the trees.

Mammone presented a plan in July of 2015 to replace the trees with smaller trees in containers, but the cost of those containers appeared prohibitive to the Council, and they asked for other options and delayed making a decision.

When Mayor Josette Mitchell took over as City Administrator in the summer of 2015, Council again asked for more research on what to do about the trees. In August Mitchell brought Council three tree species options that are recommended for streetscaping projects and proposed a plan for the removal of 41 trees and strategically replace just 15 of them. Council instructed staff to move forward with the experimental removal of two trees and return with results for Council to consider before moving forward.

In October City staff reported that when the two trees were removed they noticed that the tree roots were becoming entangled with utilities under the sidewalk. Staff told Council that six of the trees had caused noticeable damage to sidewalks and Council agreed to remove those six trees immediately and wait to remove any more, although they did agree all the trees would need to be removed before they caused more damage.

In May of 2016 Council again discussed the downtown trees and received another report from staff with a recommendation about where trees might be replaced. Staff prepared a survey for business owners to get their input on the issue.

The business owners surveyed revealed differing opinions, with 20% saying they would like the trees removed and not replaced at all, 45% saying they would like them replaced with an appropriate species, 25% saying they would like them replaced with containers, and 8% saying they would like the current trees to remain.

This past fall the City began

selectively removing some trees and in November Council met in a workshop to discuss the issue again. In December Council voted to move forward with the removal of all the trees, and wait to hear how business owners, citizens and visitors responded before making a decision about what other actions to take. This past week the Vernonia downtown was "clear cut" and all the trees removed.

So, now is your opportunity to have your say. You have all the pertinent information. Do you like the way the town looks and feels now that all the trees have been removed?

The City Council needs your input and needs to hear your opinion. If you feel strongly about this issue, one way or the other, please let your City Council (Mayor Mario Leonetti, and Councilors Bruce McNair, Mike Seager, Jill Hult, and Susan Wagner) know what you think. You can talk to them individually, come to a City Council meeting and speak during Topics From the Floor, sign a petition that is being rumored, or write to the Council and request your letter be read into the record at the next City Council meeting.

Make your voice and opinion heard, as this type of opportunity to directly affect your community and the decisions of your elected officials is rare.

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One year subscriptions
(24 issues) \$35

Vernonia's Voice is published
on the 1st and 3rd Thursday
of each month.

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Vernonia, OR 97064
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