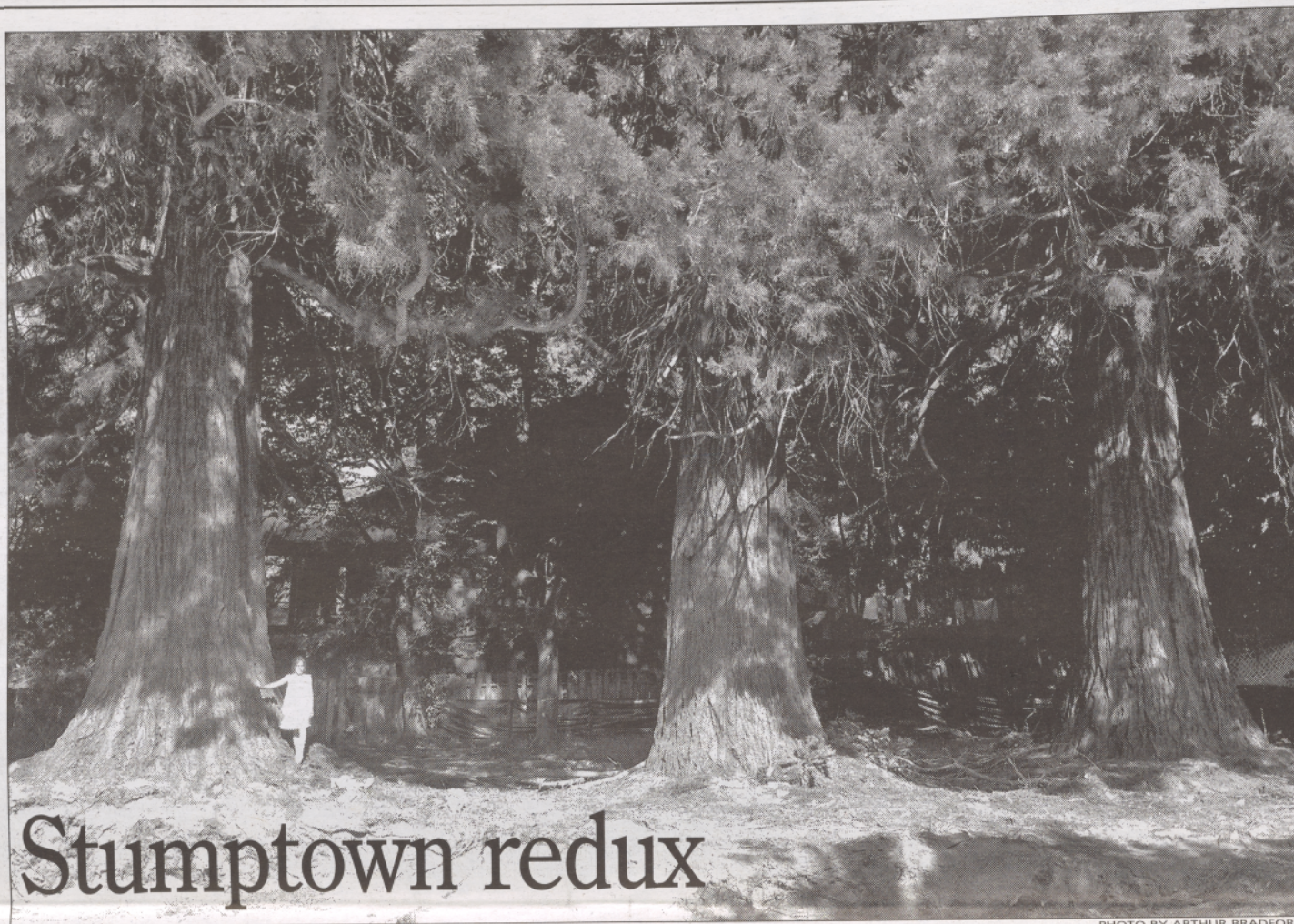




Stumptown redux

Three sequoias, slated for destruction to make way for a single home, have been at least temporarily spared by efforts of residents in the Eastmoreland neighborhood.

PHOTO BY ARTHUR BRADFORD

Portland is losing large healthy trees to development and street "improvements." It needn't and shouldn't. Here's what to do about it.

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In Eastmoreland neighborhood, residents organized to save three massive sequoias after a developer secured a permit to demolish the house, cut the trees down and build a massive new home. These trees have stood in the neighborhood for 150 years and one measured more than seven feet in diameter.

In Cully neighborhood, neighbors push to save a large healthy Douglas fir put in the cross-hairs of half-street improvements required by the City. Inflexible street "improvement" standards that do not accommodate trees could mean this beautiful native tree will face the chain saw.

Near 122nd Avenue and Foster Boulevard in East Portland, a stand of large healthy Douglas firs, including two trees more than 40 inches in diameter, are approved for removal to make way for new senior housing, a parking lot, and the same half-street improvements requirements that often put large healthy trees in jeopardy.

What is happening here? Why are Portland's largest trees suddenly facing the ax at almost every turn?

In 2007-08, neighborhood activists rallied across the city to reform Portland's confusing and ineffective patchwork of policies and codes relating to trees. The

result was a massive planning effort to assess and reform rules governing the removal of trees on private and public land and in the public right-of-way.

The upshot was a very beneficial consolidation of regulations in Title 11 of the city's municipal code and programmatic funding to implement a combination of new incentives, education and new regulations. By consolidating the tree code, applying them more consistently across the city, making tree planting requirements more consistent and establishing a new minimum tree density standard, Portland has established a framework for maintaining and hopefully expanding the urban forest canopy over time. With this aspiration in mind, the City Council adopted the tree reforms in 2010. After some delay due to funding shortfalls, the Portland's new citywide tree codes went into effect January of this year.

So why, six months later, are scenes of large, healthy trees being cut for new development becoming so common in Portland's neighborhoods?

The answer is in part self-evident. When the City Council adopted the citywide tree code in 2010, no one expected the return of white-hot housing market in Portland's inner neighborhoods that is now fueling a construction boom so voracious that demolishing homes or clearing trees is a small cost compared to the huge financial

returns some developers and investors are now reaping. The care and hard work Portlanders have and continue to invest in making their communities livable, has also made Portland a very desirable place for developers and real estate investors.

But the reason for the recent rash of tree cutting also has to do with the shortcomings of the new tree code itself. While doing much to dramatically improve and clarify city policies, targeted lobbying from real estate and industrial interests and some city bureaus, meant that the 2010 tree policy reforms fell short in at least five areas.

First, while claiming to be city-wide the 2010 tree reforms actually continued to exempt most industrial lands from the improved tree preservation and planting standards.

Second, the planning commission and City Council dropped a set of proposals for graduated tree replanting standards and fees based tree size and species. In the name of "simplicity," policy makers instead

established a standard, across the board 2-for-1 replacement requirement for tree removal in private development situations. The 2-for-1 tree mitigation cap has meant that even a massive 7-foot-wide sequoia

being cut for development only have to be replaced by two saplings. Pending administrative rules would actually extend this 2-for-1 cap to removal of trees to public development projects and public right-of-way improvements (see below).

Third, the new tree code reforms did not really contain significant regulatory

safeguards to protect Portland's largest, healthiest trees. The tree density standard requires each development site preserve or plant trees at a particular stocking level, but very little in the code actually prevents the largest, healthiest trees from being cut down in development situations.

Fourth, a lack of funding has hammered the implementation of new tree policies in

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