

Tree loss spurs residents to action

As development increases in Portland, neighborhood associations are organizing to save prominent trees and asking the city to change how it regulates the city's canopy

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Three towering sequoias in Eastmoreland. A Paradox walnut near Mount Tabor, one of the densest and largest deciduous trees in all of Portland. All are 150-year-old trees that have become flashpoints for how Portlanders are responding to the city's white-hot real estate market and development.

Longtime Portlanders are watching sleek condo buildings go up along a formerly gritty Division Street. In many neighborhoods, developers are purchasing older craftsman-style homes that are demolished to build a new, larger single-unit house on a single lot or split lots, making hundreds of thousands of dollars in profit.

Along with the demolition comes cutting down trees — “tree removal,” as it is known. Depending on the circumstances, a single tree is removed or the entire lot is clear-cut to make way for new construction.

It's a trend that has rankled residents who live near such developments, neighborhood associations, environmentalists and conservationists.

“The developers often prefer to build the entire lot. It leaves very little green space and certainly very few trees,” said Robert McCullough, chair of Southeast Uplift, the neighborhood coalition of inner Southeast Portland, and the Eastmoreland Neighborhood Association. “There is a wide level of outrage around this.”

People are increasingly looking to the city's tree code as both the culprit for tree loss and the potential white knight for Portland's oldest, largest and most ecologically important trees.

The city's tree code, which underwent a massive rewrite in 2011 and became effective at the beginning of this year, regulates tree removal and planting and aims to protect the city's urban forest. In April, an interim rule was established to provide standards for tree replacement.

However, contrary to the code's intent of canopy preservation, the new regulations appear to be leading to canopy loss.

For the first time, the city is able to track the number of trees being cut down. A total of 1,346 permits to remove and/or replant

trees were issued by the city between Jan. 1 and June 30. There has been a loss of 25,000 square feet of canopy since the interim rule was enacted. Approximately 16,000 square feet of canopy has been replanted since the rule was enacted, but that leaves a net loss of 9,000 square feet.

Before the interim rule took effect, 2.4 trees were replanted for every tree removed. Since the rule has been in effect, the rate has dropped to 0.8 tree for each tree removed, according to a report by Portland Parks and Recreation.

“There is not a whole lot of data out there yet. It's a small window of time. To call it a trend is a little generous,” Jenn Cairo, the city's forester, said at a Tree Code Oversight Advisory Committee meeting on Aug. 10. “There is a suggestion that there could be greater cumulative canopy impacts than has been seen.”

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Jim Labbe, an urban conservationist for the Audubon Society of Portland, said the amount of tree removal due to development and construction is unprecedented.

“It's very concerning,” he said.

Those who seek stronger protections for Portland's oldest trees say doing so is more than saving a tree here or there.

Portland is inevitably changing and growing and developing. But how Portland develops is what is on residents' minds — and whether elected officials and

policymakers will guide development with the thought and intention necessary to protect something that defines Portland.

When it comes to urban canopy, the amount of tree cover in a city when viewed from above, Portland's is one of the densest in the country. According to Portland Parks and Recreation, approximately 29.9 percent of Portland was covered by tree canopy in 2010, a steady increase over decades. The canopy is higher in residential areas and open spaces.

Portland earned the nickname “Stumptown” in the late 1800s when the city grew so quickly that the stumps of cut trees weren't removed, given the haste to build and develop.

Now, Portland's trees and close relationship to the environment symbolize



PHOTO COURTESY OF STEVE KELLER

The three Eastmoreland neighborhood sequoias on Southeast Martins Street that have so far been spared removal to make way for development. The largest one is 20 feet in diameter.

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