



CAMILLA MORTENSEN

TIMBERRRR!

Eugene logs its urban forest

BY ERIN ROKITA AND CAMILLA MORTENSEN

There's nothing like waking up in the morning to the sound of buzzing chainsaws on Eugene's streets. Urban forests are in decline across the country, and Eugene cuts down as many as 500 of its city street trees in an average year. Is "Tree City, USA," intent on chopping down its urban forest?

The coast redwood is one of the world's largest living species, reaching up nearly 400 feet and living more than 2,000 years. Eugene has a couple — considerably younger — of examples of this giant Oregon and California native. If you walk down 15th Avenue until you hit Mill Street, you'll be hard pressed to miss one of Eugene's redwoods. The 50-year-old tree is large for its age; it dwarfs the home it stands next to. And this tree too needed a little saving.

Back in 1944, two "young and adventurous" ex-Midwesterners, John and Lillian Durr, took a road trip from Eugene along the coast to northern California. "Somewhere along the way they dug up a small coast redwood and brought it back to Eugene to plant," explained their niece, Nena Lovinger. At the time, Lovinger was the newest addition to the family, and her uncle and aunt decided to plant the redwood in honor of her birth. "Nena's tree" stands to this day in front of the house her family built on the Mill Street property.

Last October, she learned from city officials that the sidewalk near the redwood posed a safety hazard to area residents. The tree's roots had pushed up sections of the sidewalk, causing it to crack and buckle.

In many cases, once a tree has been deemed a "hazard," the city cuts it down. But this time Lovinger and city officials agreed the best course of action was to realign and replace sections of the sidewalk to make room

for the tree's roots and protect the safety of pedestrians. "It was a happy solution for me and the tree," Lovinger says.

Not every tree has such a happy ending. Eugene's urban forest and the issues of tree removal and land development have a long, complicated history, one that leaves community members divided. Urban trees are an emotional as well as an environmental issue. So it's not surprising that the topic of cutting Eugene's trees is a heated subject.

In Eugene, we have more than 100,000 street trees, and over the past decade the city has planted on average 1,100 new trees per year. Mark Snyder, city of Eugene urban forester, says survival rates are "relatively high" for newly planted trees. "We see more trees die every year because of the dryer than normal conditions, but over the last 10 years or so, we think we have around 90 percent or higher survival rates," he says.

The city anticipates spending \$81,800 on planting trees next year through the NeighborWoods Volunteer Tree Planting Program, while an estimated \$161,000 is budgeted for "contractual hazard tree removal," Snyder says. He indicated that due to budget reductions the city can no longer afford to plant as many trees. "It's a sorry state of affairs because we can't afford what needs to be done," he says.

TREE CONFLICTS

At least once a month, *EW* gets a call from a concerned citizen who has spotted the city cutting down a tree. Sometimes the tree in question is a native Douglas fir or bigleaf maple; other times, it's a non-native black locust. Once in a while there's no tree coming

down at all: The city is just trimming the shrubs, but neighbors are tired of seeing Eugene's leafy tree canopy torn apart by chainsaws and are quick to call and complain.

EW's letters section often features questions like that of Bobbie Cirel: "Don't those who made the decision to cut these trees recognize the value of mature trees in an urban landscape?" And Shen Steiner of Eugene chided, "Where once these trees reigned supreme and majestic, now they fall one after another, removing with them homes for critters, cooling-off shade and life-sustaining oxygen. Shame on you, city of Eugene." Other Eugeneans, while angry about the cutting, are leery of going on record with their concerns, saying, "Well, I'm not an expert on trees."

It doesn't take an expert to know that Eugene's trees are more than just the shady branches downtown, known as "street trees" to foresters. Also, inside Eugene's urban growth boundary (UGB) are places like the Amazon headwaters that developers are seeking to turn into a subdivision. People like Lisa Warnes of Southeast Neighbors would rather see the headwaters maintained as a forest, part of the Ridgeline Trail hiking system. This forest in south Eugene is home to native and threatened species. Urban forests like the Amazon headwaters are "within walking distance or near bus lines, giving the citizens an opportunity for passive recreation without driving a car," says Warnes. They give "us all a sense of peace, tranquility and beauty," she says.

Perhaps the most famous attempt to save Eugene's urban trees was on June 1, 1997, when 40 of downtown's largest trees were cut to make room for the Broadway Place development. Eleven protestors climbed trees and clung to them in an attempt to delay the logging until a public hearing could be held. The Eugene Police Department sprayed every can of pepper spray they had on the protestors and borrowed more cans from Springfield and Lane County in an incident that sparked protest locally as well as from Amnesty International. Three of the protestors later sued the city, which settled for \$30,000.

As a result of the incident, local environ-

mentalists began to push for better tree protection laws, a push which has been largely blocked by developers. The Eugene Tree Foundation, a local group that works on "planting, education, and advocacy," according to their web page, came to exist during this time period. The group has planted trees and responded to incidents of illegal tree removals. However, despite the large number of activist and anti-logging groups in Eugene, there is no one activist group agitating simply to preserve Eugene's urban forest.

"I think we need much more restrictive laws about tree removal," says Eugene City Councilor Betty Taylor. "Council did pass a more restrictive ordinance as part of the Land Use Code Update several years ago," she says. But it was sent back on appeal, "and there has never been a majority of councilors to place it high on the Planning Commission's work schedule for re-consideration," she says. Taylor says every year she tries to get the tree ordinance moved up on the Planning Commission's work plan, "but never gets enough councilors' votes to make the change."

RISKY TREES

One of Eugene's claims to fame is that we have a city full of beautiful, lush trees. Every year, Eugene touts its designation as a "Tree City, USA." This designation is earned by "meeting minimum requirements for community forestry programs at the municipal level," according to the Oregon Department of Forestry. Oregon has at least 45 designated Tree Cities, and there are thousands of Tree Cities across the country.

According to Snyder, the benefits of urban trees are vast. But despite their value, he says city trees can also be hazardous.

"Some trees are dangerous," agrees Alby Thoumsin, certified arborist and president of the Eugene Tree Foundation. Arborists not only prune trees but are paid to cut them down as well. "In an urban setting trees need to be removed because they represent a risk," he says. Thoumsin points out that cities are not wild ecosystems, and city trees need to be maintained to prevent injury and damage.

According to Snyder, "a tree is not a hazard unless something would be harmed ... so



KATHRYN SCHUESSLER

Urban trees give 'us all a sense of peace, tranquility and beauty.'

— Lisa Warnes, Southeast Neighbors