

UP A TREE

Plans call for cutting 70 highway alders by spring

By **ERICK BENGEL**
EO Media Group

CANNON BEACH — Before March 15, the Oregon Department of Transportation plans to cut down the first 70 of about 200 dead and dying alder trees along U.S. Highway 101, between Cannon Beach’s north entrance and Sunset Boulevard.

The operation is the first phase of a three-phase tree-thinning project, said Bill Jablonski, manager of ODOT District 1.

Last spring, ODOT flagged about 200 of the roughly 5,000 trees near that stretch of highway for removal, marking them with light blue dots. The trees may pose a threat to drivers, especially the trees with branches that lean precariously over the road, he said. Once ODOT identified them as a safety hazard, the department became legally liable for any accidents that may occur as a result of their continued presence in the highway corridor.

Because the trees are in a state highway right of way, ODOT can legally eliminate them without obtaining a permit first, despite a city’s or county’s ordinance that might require a permit — a fact that ODOT confirmed with the state Department of Justice last fall.

“I was verifying that the law does exist,” he said. “ODOT has the right to take out danger trees in the right of way.”

Another 70 trees are slated for removal in 2016, and the remainder of the 200 targeted trees for 2017. The final number of trees removed may be less than 200 but will not exceed 200, he said.

“We certainly have an obligation to the people who are motorists that we remove the danger trees,” Jablonski said,

adding that the department doesn’t yet know whether it will contract out the labor.

Moving forward

ODOT approached the City Council in mid-2014 to let the city know of its plans, as a “way for us to be transparent with the community,” Jablonski said.

Initially, the city asked its arborist, Will Caplinger, to independently review the problematic trees. But, because ODOT and the city didn’t follow up with each other, that review never happened, Public Works Director Dan Grassick said.

“ODOT did not pursue the project, and so the decision was made not to spend the resources unnecessarily,” he said.

But now ODOT is pursuing the project, Jablonski said. The department intends to renew its conversation with Grassick and City Manager Brant Kucera.

ODOT is open to feedback from the city and its residents, Jablonski said. If people want ODOT to offset the loss by planting new trees, the department could very well do that, he said.

“I think (ODOT) should be required to replace whatever they take out,” said former Mayor Mike Morgan, who works as Astoria’s interim city planner.

However, since the project involves a mile-long stretch of trees that ODOT believes could collapse onto the highway, there isn’t likely to be much negotiation before ODOT goes to work, Jablonski said.

“We recognize that there is a sensitivity (to) the trees’ removal, but we also have an obligation to the motoring public to remove those trees,” he said. “If anything, we’re doing a court-



About a mile-long corridor along U.S. Highway 101 between Cannon Beach’s north entrance and Sunset Boulevard may be thinned out by the Oregon Department of Transportation. Highway officials plan to remove 200 dead and dying trees. An estimated 5,000 trees line the corridor.



A blue dot is displayed on twin alder trees on the west side of U.S. Highway 101 near the Sunset Boulevard entrance. ODOT has marked about 200 trees for possible removal from along the highway; the removal will be done in three phases, beginning before March 15 and ending in 2017.

sy to the city to let them know what our plan is.”

ODOT needs to finish the first phase by late winter to get ahead of the nesting period for migratory birds that begins April 1. That’s a rule every ODOT

project has to abide by — otherwise, the department must hire a biologist to see if there’s any nesting material in the trees, and that can be expensive, Jablonski said.

The city will “provide appro-

prate notice” to Cannon Beach residents when the time comes, Grassick said.

A political issue
When ODOT came before the council last year, “We were

very opposed to just the wholesale removal of those alders,” Morgan said.

He noted that during the wind and rain storms of early February no trees or branches had fallen onto the highway.

“The proof is in the pudding. If the trees aren’t causing a problem, they don’t need to be cut,” he said. “I think it’s a solution in search of a problem.”

Residents who live near the highway tend to view those trees as a “visual and noise buffer,” he said.

Shawn LaMunyon and his wife, Sarah McAllister, who own a double lot east of the highway, are two such residents. Asked what he thinks of ODOT’s proposal, LaMunyon said flatly, “I don’t want it to happen.”

Though he understands that some thinning may be necessary to improve highway safety, he feels the 200-tree project is too large.

Morgan said Cannon Beach citizens “could and should” contact state Rep. Deborah Boone, D-Cannon Beach, and state Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, and “make it a political issue.”

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