To the Planning commission:

The other day I was advised that the city is considering a change in the tree retention ordinance. As a Real Estate Agent with over 41 years in the business and specializing in all aspects of buying and selling land I have observed a lot about trees. I also have a family history in the logging industry and have grown up in the woods. The following are the observations of a non-botanist.

Trees ARE an important part of the ecology and tree retention adds to the personality of a community. However trees are also a living thing susceptible to all the problems a living thing can have, including man.

Though tree retention sounds like a good thing on the surface it is not without risk. And financial risks that a city is not willing to take responsibility for even though the city requires tree retention.

The most common risks involve the development of vacant lots. When a home is built on a lot the very activity of home building puts a great strain on the relationship of home and tree.

Evergreen trees are at most risk as they do not have a “tap” root for added stability. They are like a pedestal lamp. Their roots run just under the surface radiating out like tentacles to absorb the life giving moisture. You break a leg on a pedestal lamp and it will fall over, same for an evergreen. Ditches are dug, heavy equipment and foundation can crush or cut the roots on one or more sides of a tree. The root system radiates out beyond the drip line (the end of the longest branches) and are easily crushed by heavy equipment. The tree may remain healthy looking but ready to fall when the conditions are right.

The conifer species are a different matter. Maples will get “crotch rot” and eventually a limb, usually the diameter of a small car will come crashing down, without warning, to take out your car or the bedroom. They dump a lot of leaves, great for mulch and firewood but hard on gutters and a lot of work to take care of.

Cottonwoods, you ever notice that on a very tall cottonwood tree there are no large limbs except way up high? And the trunk is clean and straight up to those limbs? What happened to all those limbs below that? They got too heavy with water and fell off. It doesn’t take a wind storm, though wind is nature’s pruner, they just got too heavy and fell, on a whim, took out the power or the school bus stop or worse the other bedroom. Good for pulp and not good for fireplaces (smell like burning diapers) and dirty for landscaping.

Alder, grow quick and die quick. If the bark is damaged on an alder the tree dies a little there. (On evergreens a blemish will pitch over much like a scab on your dinged hand) The ding gets rotten and eventually the whole tree dies. Alders are the first, beside fire weed, to come up in a logged or burned out area. Their death and decay provide nutrients that the evergreens need to flourish. Like a weed they tend to grow towards the most available sun light. That is why
there are “leaners” grown on flat ground along a roadway for instance. In the competition for sunlight they do that. They are hard to fall except for in the direction of the lean and dangerous to climb to take out in pieces.

Fir trees can be majestic in their old age and provide a lot of benefit. But they can also kill. A mature fir tree of 150 to 250 feet can reach a long way when it falls Fir trees that grow in a like forest of same age trees will grow up to 24 inches a season all of them competing for the sunlight. As they grow fast the lower limbs die and fall off due to lack of sunlight. They grow tall and thin. These tall thin trees, when mature, were sought out for pilings and telephone poles. The problem is when you try to save the trees and carve out homes the hole in the trees where the home, driveway, barn etcetera are has removed the natural wind break creating more stress on the downwind trees during a wind storm. The remaining trees are called “sail tops” and they can blow over or the top blows out during a wind storm.

Fir trees that grow individually (not in a thick forested environment) tend to grow more slowly with thicker trunks, better root structure.

Each and every lot is as different as you and I. And to have a specific tree retention formal/requirement can be too specific to be realistically fair with the personalities of each lot.

I suggest the following:

1) On lots over half acre trees over 18 inches can be removed and those trees removed, other than in the building envelope, be replaced one for one or one for two;
2) On lots under half acre all trees can be removed. Except for the building envelope, new trees to replace those removed one for every three provided that the planted tree, when mature, will not be a safety threat to the downwind neighbor;
3) Trees should be planted away from structures so that as they mature they do not become a home maintenance issue requiring early removal;
4) Tree replacement should not have to be like for like. For instance a California Redwood is very majestic and when planted out in the open tends to grow broad and full. A dog wood can replace a fir and they tend to remain smaller and more manageable for confined space.
5) The “building envelope” is that area reserved for the structure and hard improvements like sidewalk and driveway and should not be included in the tree calculation;
6) Lots with sensitive areas may have the trees removed provided that the trees are replaced with an equal to or more beneficial ground cover for that area.

Thanks for including this letter for your consideration.

Keith B Dewey, Real Estate since 1973 and known as “Dewey the Dirt Man”