

Save the Tree Canopy

By Prithvi G. Tikhe

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. – On Tuesday, Sept. 26, the Health and Environment Committee of Cambridge ordered the city staff to draft an improved Tree Protection Ordinance. The order was based on the discussion at the meeting of the existing City’s Tree Ordinance and possible ways to improve the ordinance to protect the tree canopy while protecting individual property rights.

According to the current city of Cambridge’s Tree Protection Ordinance, owners who wish to remove a tree measuring more than eight inches in diameter four feet above the ground – Diameter at Breast Height (DBH) – on a private property require a special permit and must either plant a replacement tree(s) with the same DBH on the same lot, or pay the cost of replacement tree(s) and associated maintenance costs into the City’s Tree Replacement Fund.

On June 20, 2016, Cambridge city councilors, Jan Devereux and Dennis J. Carlone ordered the Cambridge city staff to suggest reasonable and practical updates to the Tree Protection Ordinance and review the amount of the required payment into the Tree Replacement Fund based on the increased costs to the city for planting, watering and maintaining new trees.

This original order was put on hold until the Health and Environment Committee public hearing.

Devereux presented an overview of the present Cambridge Tree Protection Ordinance and compared it to the ordinances of Wellesley and Atlanta. She said the removal of any public

or private tree in Atlanta requires a special permit and that Wellesley protects most trees on private property.

“On the contrary, the vast majority of [tree removal] projects on private properties in Cambridge do not require a special permit,” Devereux said. “They involve trees that are below the DBH and so are not protected.”

John Pitkin, a member of the Inman Square Climate Action Team, which works to preserve the honey locust trees in Velluci Plaza in Inman Square, encouraged the city council to think of new ways of protecting trees and go beyond amending the existing ordinance.

Pitkin showed an image of three honey locust trees planted 40 years ago in Inman Square. The trees are situated at the western end of a group of “heat islands,” an area that is significantly warmer than its surrounding areas due to human activities. He said the tree directly exposed to the heat is the shortest. This tree cools and humidifies the air from the east that reaches the adjacent tree. The last tree in line receives air that is conditioned by both trees and is the largest of the three.

“The trees work together to create the environment they need to thrive,” Pitkin said.

Steven Nutter, executive director of Green Cambridge, a nonprofit corporation that works to create a more sustainable city and to protect the environment for the health and safety of all, directed the discussion to account for the tree canopy in Cambridge as a collective benefit for all residents.

“Trees provide protection for residents and buildings from sun, absorb rainwater runoff, and clean our air,” Nutter said during the discussion at the meeting.

He added that the tree canopy must be measured and annually reported by neighborhoods and included in the Community Development Department's Neighborhood Statistical Profile.

Nutter also suggested starting a Heritage Tree Program that would designate trees of a certain age as automatically protected. He said trees are no different than old buildings and just as the city has a review process to take down older buildings, the city should have a similar process for trees.

David Lefcourt, the city arborist, said since 79 percent of the tree canopy in Cambridge is on private property, the city needs to educate property owners on how to prune and care for them.

Based on the recommendations discussed to develop stronger protection for trees on private properties in Cambridge, the Health and Environment Committee ordered to draft an improved Tree Protection Ordinance that would be voted on by the city council in future public hearings.

"This will be the first step in recognizing that all trees, regardless of where their roots are, add value to the broader community," Devereux said. "Improving the ordinance is certainly worth doing."

