



Tree Removals and Replacements:

The City Can Improve Processes to Protect and Grow the Community Forest

A Report from the City Auditor
Issued November 2022

<http://www.sanjoseca.gov/auditor>

Background

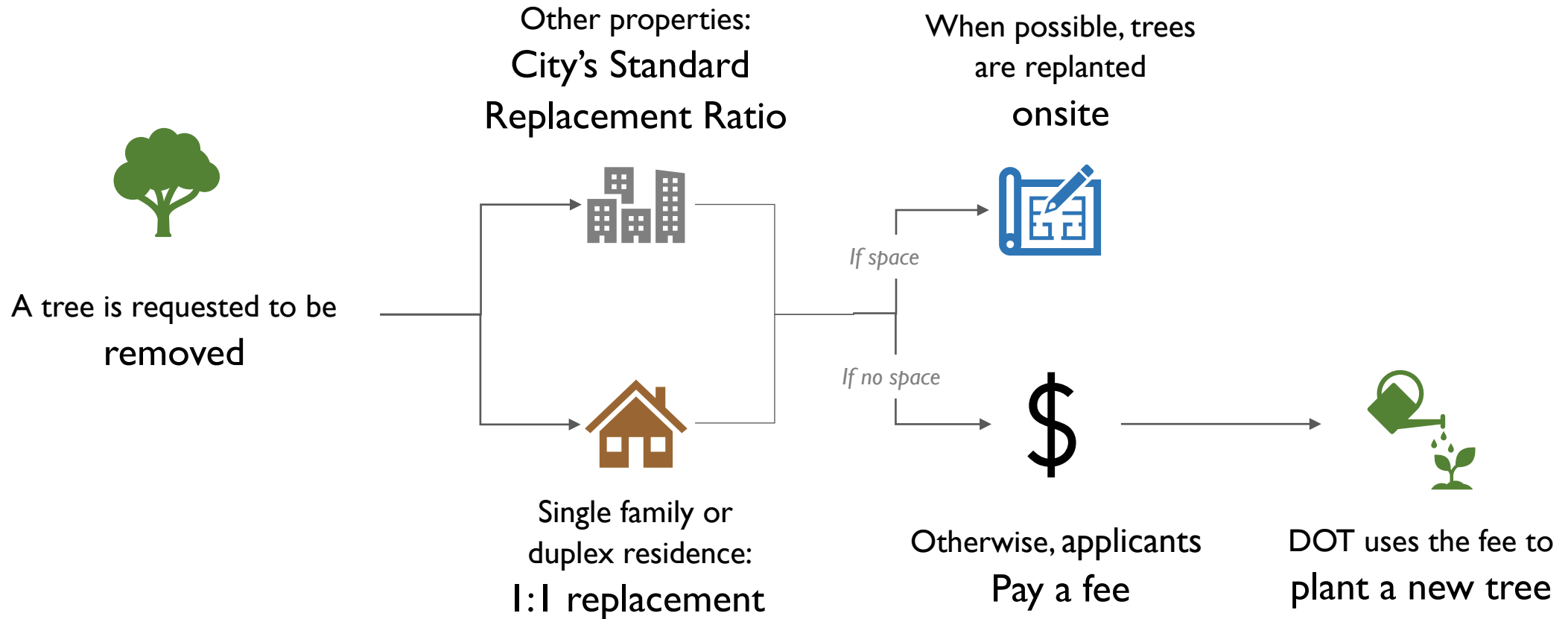
- San José has 1.6 million trees on private property and public spaces.
- In February 2022, the City approved the Community Forest Management Plan and a request for this audit.
- DOT, PBCE, and Public Works are all involved overseeing or managing trees, along with PRNS.

The purpose of the audit was to review:

- a. how and whether the City is collecting tree-related mitigation fees from developers,
- b. how and whether the City is enforcing tree-planting conditions on development,
- c. how the City is spending tree mitigation funds, and
- d. how the City can most cost-effectively plant more trees.

Background

Exhibit: Private Property Tree Replacement Process



Finding I: Private Property Tree Removal Permitting Requires Better Resources and Improved Processes

- Nearly 1/3 of permits we reviewed had errors, resulting in 142 fewer trees planted or \$110,050 in in-lieu fees.
- Standard training and further guidance can improve the tree removal process.
- Planners do not have tree-related expertise. Guidance or arborist support would aid decision-making.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

PBCE should:

- Develop procedures on tree removal permit processing
- Provide planners with technical guidance about trees or provide further access to certified arborists

Finding I: Private Property Tree Removal Permitting Requires Better Resources and Improved Processes

- In our sample, the process to review live tree removals exceeded the time recovered in the fee.
- CFMP recommendations may further impact the process.
- PBCE plans to review the fee and related process.

RECOMMENDATION:

PBCE should:

→ Review live tree removal fee and associated process.

Finding 2: The City Can Better Ensure Replacement Trees are Planted and Regrowing the Canopy

- The City does not verify that applicants planted required replacement trees.
- There are two verification methods, but neither is performed routinely.
- The City determines the number of replacement trees without accounting for the canopy lost and does not provide guidance for suitable replacement tree species.

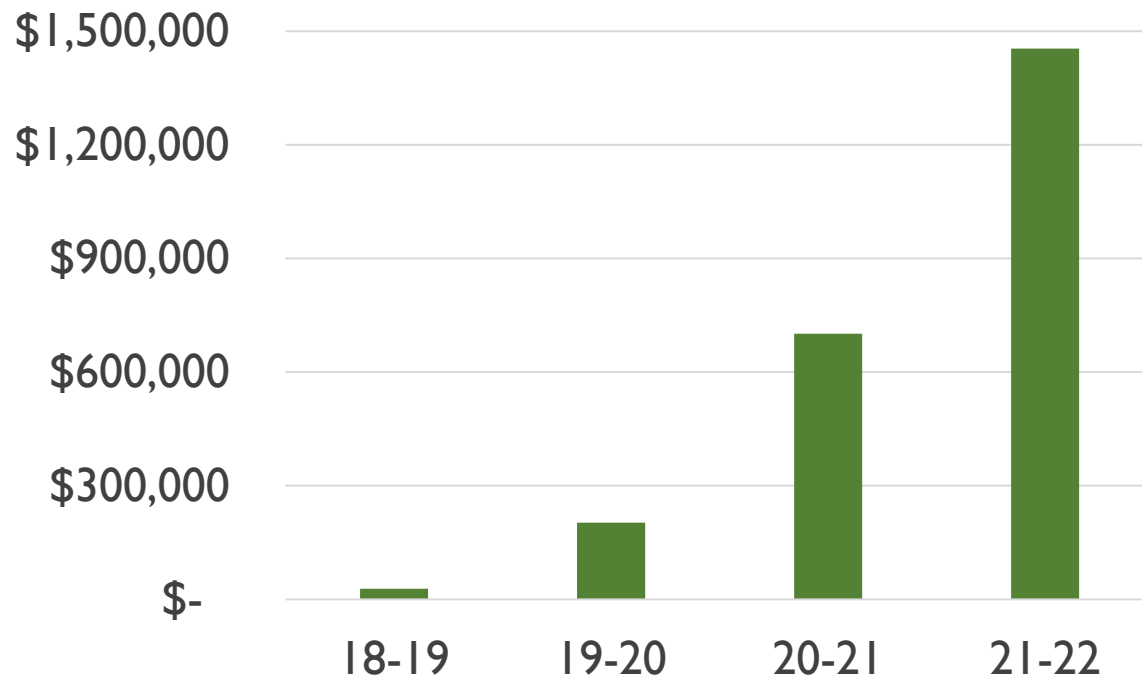
RECOMMENDATIONS:

PBCE should:

- Develop procedures to enforce tree planting requirements
- Revise the tree replacement policy to incorporate canopy size and provide guidance for tree selection.

Finding 3: DOT Has Not Been Spending In-Lieu Fees Timely

Exhibit: Tree In-Lieu Fee Balances Have Grown



Source: Auditor analysis of FMS and AMANDA fee records. Data indicates cumulative in-lieu fees collected less in-lieu fee spending by the end of each fiscal year.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

DOT should:

- Identify planting locations or uses for accumulated fees
- Create guidelines for how fees should be spent
- Regularly review information on fee collection

Finding 4: DOT Should Evaluate Costs and Establish Metrics for the Community Forest Program's Objectives

- The CFMP has multiple objectives for the community forest.
- DOT has several potential planting approaches, including City-funded and directed plantings or engaging private property owners in planting efforts.
- Each approach has varying costs and may be more or less effective in meeting a particular goal of the tree planting program.

Costs include:

- Procuring and planting the tree
- Site preparation
- Traffic safety measures
- Watering during establishment
- Future maintenance

Finding 4: DOT Should Evaluate Costs and Establish Metrics for the Community Forest Program's Objectives

- Data on tree removals, replacements, and tree planting is limited.
- To measure how the City is meeting objectives, the City should track more data relating to tree planting, tree removals, and outreach efforts.
- Metrics would help the City evaluate cost effectiveness of planting approaches in meeting objectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

DOT should:

- Develop metrics and work with PBCE on necessary data collection to measure progress toward the City's tree planting objectives
- Work with the Community Forest Advisory Committee to develop an outreach plan

Conclusion

This report has ten recommendations to improve the City's processes to protect and grow the community forest.

We would like to thank the Departments of Transportation; Planning, Building and Code Enforcement, and Public Works. We also thank the City Attorney's Office and the City Manager's Budget Office.

The audit report is available at www.sanjoseca.gov/auditor

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