



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

The trees in DeLaveaga Park were much thinner in 1931.

Today, firefighters say the urban forest of DeLaveaga could fuel a firestorm.

# City plans to thin DeLaveaga Park fire hazard

## Ultimately, 1,700 trees may be removed in the name of safety

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SANTA CRUZ — The densely wooded urban forest in DeLaveaga Park above the Prospect Heights neighborhood could fuel a deadly firestorm, and city officials want to do something about it.

"If we're going to have an urban forest abutted to houses, we have a responsibility to manage it effectively," said city Fire Chief Ron Prince. "It is in very bad shape."

The city plans to begin with a three- to five-acre "demonstration" project in the 100-acre forested area, which not only borders Prospect Heights but also the Cabrillo College Stroke Center, the county's Emergency Communications Center and the golf course's 17th fairway.

The demonstration project is de-

signed to show how clearing ground debris and thinning the trees would not only curb the fire threat, but also make the forest healthier.

Ultimately, city officials want to clean up the entire 100-acre area, as well as other forests around town where housing developments stand side-by-side with overgrown Mother Nature.

Detractors worry that such an ambitious project would lead to so many trees being removed that the beauty of the stands would be seriously impaired. There also are concerns about potential damage to butterfly and other wildlife habitats.

The City Council this week asked staff to prepare a plan for thinning a three- to five-acre section of the DeLaveaga forest. Be-

fore the plan will be implemented, however, a more careful butterfly count must be carried out, and alternatives to using herbicides must be researched.

"Since the Oakland (Hills) fire in 1991, everybody is alert to the possibility it could happen here under the right conditions," said Vice Mayor Scott Kennedy. "The last thing we want is the emergency (communications) center to burn while they're trying to manage a fire emergency."

Kennedy said he was prepared to approve the full 25-acre demonstration project that staff initially presented to the council, but others had concerns that the environmental review on that plan was inadequate. The smaller project was a compromise.

Mayor Celia Scott, for instance, was concerned that the total number of trees expected to be removed in the larger project had not been counted correctly. Staff said it would be some 1,700, but Scott

thought it might be more.

Trees to be cut included not only eucalyptus and pitch-canker-infested Monterey pines, but also some cypress and oaks.

More importantly, said Prince, is the ground debris made up of brush and fallen limbs, which in some areas is four feet high. He said the ground is so covered with debris and the trees are growing so close that it's impossible to walk through portions of the forest.

"It is in very bad shape," said Prince. "A lot of the eucalyptus trees are just falling down."

A key part of any plan, the fire chief said, would be ongoing management so dead trees and debris are not allowed to remain in the forest.

Scott said she is reserving judgment until she sees the specific plan, which will include a more accurate cost estimate.

"I'm not opposed per se," said Scott about the plan to manage the DeLaveaga stand of trees. "But I

have a lot of concerns."

On Friday, Santa Cruz residents Patricia Matejcek and Dan Dickmeyer petitioned the City Council to form a Friends of DeLaveaga Park Committee that would help develop any plan to manage the urban forest.

The two said the existing environmental review of the DeLaveaga project was inadequate, and too few citizens have been told about what the city is proposing.

"Such deficient process does not bode well for the public understanding, acceptance and support for the project, nor for the protection of important community resources," Matejcek and Dickmeyer said in a letter.

Rudy Quintanar, the city's superintendent of parks, said he thinks the revised and scaled-back demonstration project will be returned to the council for final approval in late spring or early summer.

At that time, neighbors in the

Prospect Heights area will be alerted that the issue has been scheduled for review. That's something that didn't occur before this week's meeting, and few people turned out.

Critics point out that the 100-acre DeLaveaga forest would look dramatically different if it's thinned as envisioned. Quintanar agreed, but added that the new look eventually would be accepted.

"When you look out there now, it's a big mass of green with splotches of dead trees in it," Quintanar said. "Once the project is done and your mind begins to see a different picture, it will look pleasing. It's not going to be totally denuded."

The way the forest will look concerned Councilwoman Katherine Beiers, but others on the council pointed out that the small demonstration project would give people an idea of what the bigger project bodes in terms of future views.