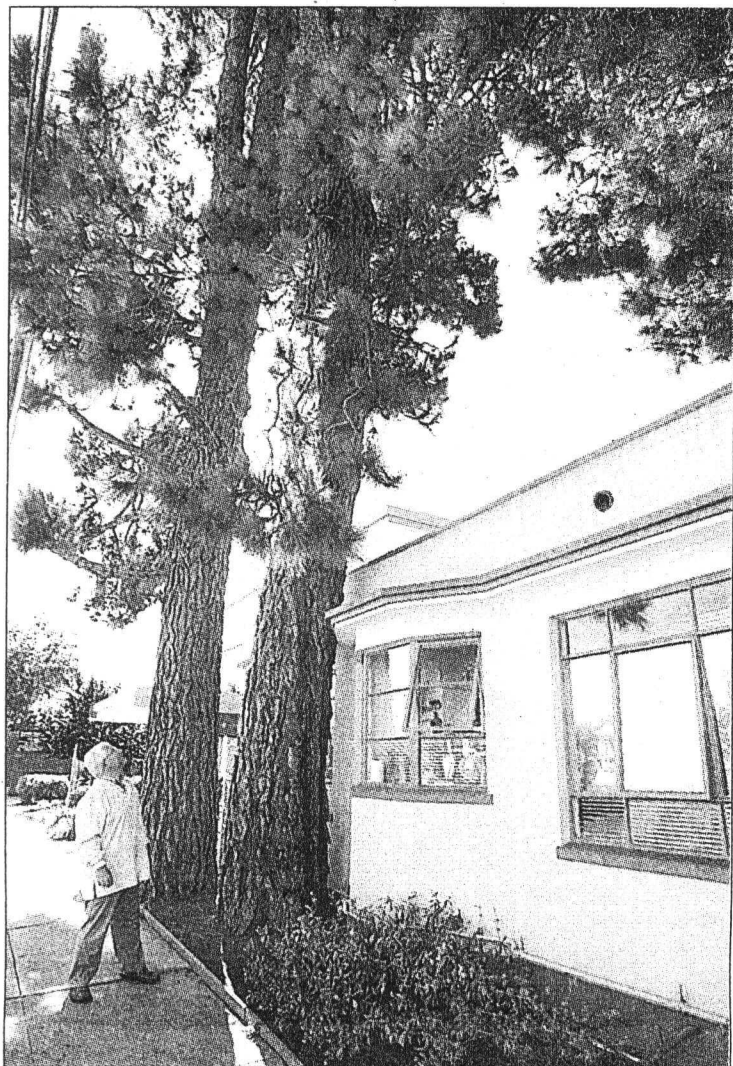


# Big tree rules in limbo



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Dr. Bill Christie looks at one of the four Canary Island pines cutting into his dental office in downtown Santa Cruz. Parks Superintendent Mauro Garcia said about 200 heritage tree removal permits were approved in fiscal year 2013 alone, a figure reflective of a typical year.

City officials  
examining request  
for environmental study

By J.M. BROWN

[jbrown@santacruzsentinel.com](mailto:jbrown@santacruzsentinel.com)

SANTA CRUZ — City officials say it's too early to know what changes they may make to a proposed expansion of Santa Cruz's heritage tree ordinance after calls last week to undertake a thorough environmental review.

Parks Superintendent Mauro Garcia said his staff will work with the City Council and the city's legal and planning teams to determine how to respond to a letter from a Santa Cruz law firm representing the conservation group Save Our Big Trees.

"We thought we put together an ordinance that would work," Garcia said July 11. "We apparently missed a couple of areas."

Garcia said the intent of altering the nearly 20-year-old heritage tree ordinance — a process in the works for four years — was to strike a better balance between protecting trees and supporting the needs of property owners to address problems posed by them, such as fire hazards, allergies and the financial cost of maintenance.

However, the city, by its own estimation, already grants between 75 and 85 percent of heritage tree removal permits each year. Garcia said about 200 heritage tree removal permits were approved in fiscal year 2013 alone, a figure reflective of a typical year.

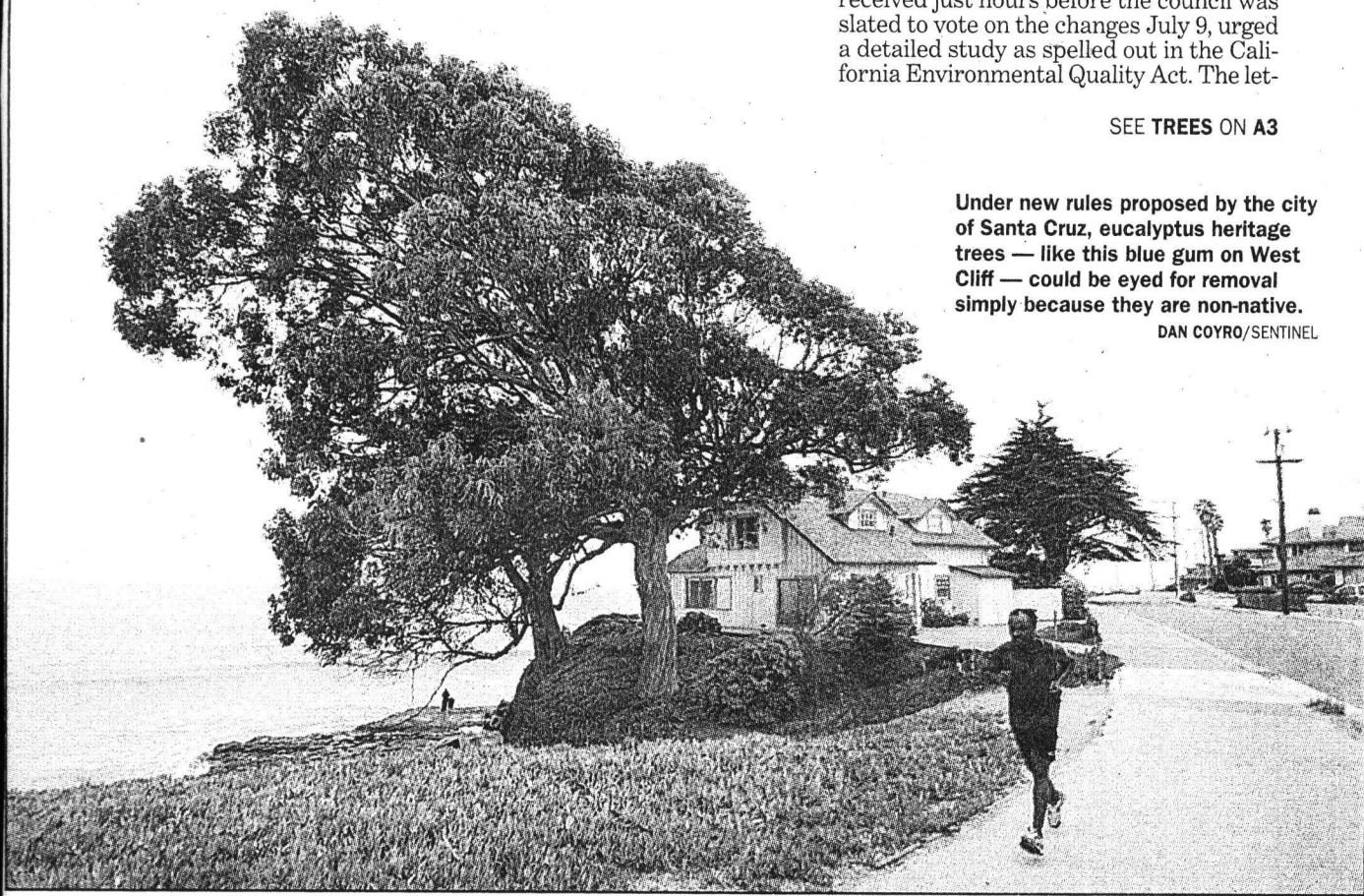
Opponents to the city's proposed expansion in provisions for tree removal say they are sweeping and vague, and only will serve to encourage more felling without taking into account the long-term environmental and scenic impacts.

The letter from Wittwer & Parkin, received just hours before the council was slated to vote on the changes July 9, urged a detailed study as spelled out in the California Environmental Quality Act. The let-

SEE TREES ON A3

Under new rules proposed by the city of Santa Cruz, eucalyptus heritage trees — like this blue gum on West Cliff — could be eyed for removal simply because they are non-native.

DAN COYRO/SENTINEL





# TREES

Continued from A1

ter questions the city's contention that it is exempt from the costly and time-consuming review because it is acting in its capacity as a regulatory agency and is seeking to improve the environment.

City Attorney John Barisone said he regarded the letter as a threat to sue and advised the council to cancel the meeting.

## WHAT IS PROTECTED

The 1994 ordinance protects trees whose trunks are at least 44 inches in circumference, have historic value, are particularly attractive or provide valuable habitat. It allows for trees that are diseased or endangering property to be removed after a determination by the city's urban forester — a decision that can be appealed to the city's Parks and Recreation Commission and ultimately to the council.

The proposed changes, approved by the commission in January, will not affect those rules. In a most recent example, Santa Cruz dentist Dr. Bill Christie is seeking to remove four well-recognized Canary Island pines in front of his Center Street building, which the city's arborist has agreed are endangering the structure. Former Mayor Chris Krohn has appealed to the council to save the trees, and the matter could be heard Sept. 10.

The proposed changes, however, do add human health hazards or unreasonable economic burden to the list of acceptable reasons to request removal. Most controversial is the proposed addition of the blue gum eucalyptus and acacia species because they are non-native, fast-growing and highly flammable.

A parks report prepared for the council said the changes would not require removal of non-native trees or necessarily cause a general increase in the number of trees cut down. The report noted that large tree removal is expensive and that each case still would be evaluated individually by the forester.



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

**The four 80-foot tall Canary Island pines are raising Bill Christie's dental office to the point where the building is cracking and he can't open the windows.**

But Gillian Greensite, a longtime resident known for appealing tree removal permits, said, "To me, it's logical that if you give people more grounds to take trees out, more will come out. People who don't like big trees should avoid buying property where big trees grow."

Santa Cruz resident Ari Feld is also opposed to the changes.

"It's already pretty darn easy for homeowners to get their requests approved," he said. "If we make it easier for homeowners to remove trees, it just doesn't seem like they stand a chance at all."

## ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

Greensite, a member of Save Our Big Trees, said the letter sent to the council Tuesday was not intended to threaten legal action. She said its purpose was to formally notify the city of concerns about the lack of environmental review that she and other residents had been raising for some time with parks officials.

The parks report claims making it possible to remove non-native trees "would not necessarily have the potential for causing a cumulative impact or significant effect on the environment."

Former Mayor Celia Scott disagrees, noting that large trees absorb carbon and that removing more of them is at odds with the city's own Climate Action Plan. And without knowing how many heritage trees exist there is no way to really gauge the impact of removing more of them.

"There just isn't enough data there," she said.

Garcia, the parks superintendent, acknowledged the city's records on how many heritage trees have been cut down are not conclusive and said the city will continue to seek grant funding to conduct a citywide survey of the trees that remain.

In the meantime, other residents are eager to see restrictions lifted.

Scott's neighbors, John and Judee D'Anna, fear a eucalyptus grove that sits behind their home on property belonging to Scott and another neighbor. Although the ordinance changes would not allow them to seek the removal of trees on their neighbors' private property, the couple believes residents should have more leeway to cut down trees on their own land or on public land.

"It is a tremendous fire hazard," Judee D'Anna said. "They could fall on our house."

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