

Rio del Mar improvement group tries to ease regulations for cutting trees

RIO DEL MAR — The Rio del Mar Improvement Association is pursuing a program that could make it easier for residents to cut down diseased or life- and property-threatening trees.

Santa Cruz County Environmental Coordinator Susan Williamson met with association directors Monday, promising to work with the group. The county administers a so-called "significant tree ordinance," which requires a permit before such trees may be cut down.

Association President Vince Casey said the Rio del Mar area "probably has more old, property-threatening trees than any other

area." He said residents often "live with the threat" of those trees, many of which are huge Monterey pines or eucalyptus, because of the expense and red tape involved in getting a tree-removal permit.

Williamson said the county could coordinate a tree-removal program in which "whole blocks or 20 homes may obtain a blanket permit" to remove life- or property-threatening trees.

Before anything could be done, however, she said more investigation was needed on the extent of the problem. Williamson said the county's tree-replacement list also had to be updated, since any tree removed would have to be replaced with one

that doesn't pose safety problems.

County regulations now require a tree-removal permit whenever a "significant" tree — defined as having a trunk 20 inches in diameter or more at breast height — is to be felled.

Casey said that neither the association nor residents are looking to remove trees just because they're large.

"The majority of people probably bought homes here because of the trees," he said. "It's sort of like living in a forest. We don't want to clear-cut the area."

Casey added, however, that in a recent association survey respondents placed tree-removal and better tree maintenance in their top-10 problems.

The cost of the permits also came into question.

Williamson said routine permits for trees in a single-family residential neighborhood, such as Rio del Mar, cost \$135. The cost goes up significantly, however, when two or more trees are removed. Permits could run as high as \$415.