

Tempers run high in the urban forest

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Tree-cutting curtailed in Mall lighting plan

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SANTA CRUZ — There are few places where trees are a bigger political issue than here, where concern for the city's "urban forest" can rouse intense emotions.

Last month the City Council unanimously rejected a long-discussed plan for new streetlights on the Pacific Garden Mall because the plan called for the removal of 19 trees, which Councilwoman Mardi Wormhoudt termed "totally unacceptable."

Instead, this week, the city plans to begin trimming the trees, rather than cutting them down. As approved by the City Council, the city will take shears to 25 trees in five different clusters along the Mall.

But some members of three city commissions aren't happy. They worked for more than a year on the streetlighting plan, and feel that their work was never given a fair hearing because of the emotional response to the tree-cutting issue.

City officials even received a threatening phone call over the

issue, in which an unidentified man said that "if any trees come down, the buildings will start coming down too," Police Chief Jack Bassett said.

"It got blown out of proportion by people's assumptions," said Gerry Mandel, co-director of the Children's Art Foundation. "People thought we wanted to raze all the trees on the Mall."

Downtown merchants and shoppers have long wanted more lighting on the Mall, which can be a dark and scary place to stroll at night. Of particular concern are several over-

grown clumps of trees among the more than 200 trees on the Mall, which immerse portions of the sidewalk in pools of blackness after dark.

Last year the City Council appointed a group to work on a streetlighting plan for the Mall. The streetlighting committee then worked up a plan in cooperation with the city's Parks and Recreation Commission and the Downtown Commission.

The plan called for removing 19 trees from the dense clusters of ficus trees in front of Plaza Books, the Del

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Mar Theater, Bank of America, Leask's, and at the intersection of Lincoln Street. Removal of the trees would have allowed dappled sunlight to penetrate through the foliage, and made room for streetlights.

It was also felt that the dense clusters of ficus were too closely planted in the first place. The 18

year-old ficus trees "aren't nearly full grown," Mandel said. "And they're already overcrowded. They really are huge trees, I've seen them in L.A. and you can't believe how huge they get."

But in December the plan was

Please see back of section

A-16—Santa Cruz Sentinel — Sunday, Jan. 10, 1988

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Continued from Page A1

challenged by landscape architect Roy Rydell, who lives locally and had participated in the original planning of the Mall garden. When Rydell's counter-proposal to cut only six trees and radically prune the rest was turned down by Parks and Recreation Commission, he began a petition drive to save the trees.

Rydell also appealed the Parks and Recreation Commission's decision to the City Council.

At the Dec. 22 council meeting, Mayor John Laird presented the council with a letter proposing that the city hire an independent consultant to review the tree-cutting proposal. Although Laird's proposal was not on the agenda as a public hearing, Rydell was allowed to speak to the council and present his plan.

The council then rejected its commissions' plan and accepted Rydell's — without any comment from commission members, some of whom were dumbfounded to hear of the decision the next day.

Had Rydell's appeal been on the council agenda, the commissioners "would have brought our slides and other materials to support our position," Mandel said. "The (tree) issue was on the agenda under another guise, but no one in our wildest dreams thought they would take the actions they did."

In addition, the council meeting was held just two days before Christmas, which meant most business people were busy with the holiday rush.

"We know that people feel strongly about trees," said Neil Coonerty, chairman of the Downtown Commission and owner of Bookshop Santa Cruz. "And the commissioners knew that the City Council might modify or reverse our findings. But it's frustrating to work so long and then not be able to present our side of the picture."

Councilwoman Mardi Wormhoudt said the council acted properly and that the commissioners would have

been able to speak if they had attended the meeting.

"They knew it was on the agenda, though it wasn't in quite the form they expected," said Wormhoudt. "It wasn't a public hearing, but we always recognize people in the audience who want to speak."

"It was a pretty extreme recommendation to remove 20 trees," said Wormhoudt. "Once a tree's gone, it's gone forever. It's a dreadful loss."

Many merchants are also upset that they have been cast as tree-haters by people opposed to the plan. Mall merchants taxed themselves to construct the Mall garden in the first place, and have taxed themselves ever since to keep the gardens in good repair, said Rick Kuhn, executive director of the Downtown Association.

"We would be the last to advocate removal of trees and destruction of the Mall," Kuhn said. "But a tunnel of foliage is not attractive either as a park or a business district."

Under Rydell's plan six trees will be removed and 25 others radically trimmed to allow light through to the sidewalk. Four trees in front of the Bank of America building will be cut, as well as two in front of Ford's Department store. One of the trees slated for removal at Lincoln Street in the original plan fell down recently in high winds.

City parks officials will meet with Rydell Tuesday, and the trimming in the areas that had been slated for cutting will begin shortly after.

In the meantime, the street-lighting program will be put on hold for at least another six months while officials see how well the trimming works. Some merchants are skeptical about the radical trimming that will be required to let enough light through.

"One fear is that it might be better to remove a few trees and let the rest remain full, than to trim them all and leave it looking like a bad haircut," Kuhn said.