

Trees Officials pruning Santa Cruz heritage tree law

Changes would ease restrictions on removing invasive acacia, eucalyptus

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SANTA CRUZ — City leaders are evaluating changes to one of Santa Cruz's most revered and

reviled rules: the heritage tree ordinance.

City code prohibits landowners from cutting down trees of a certain age or size on private property. The rule has inspired

neighborhood battles between dedicated tree huggers who want old trees to remain and frustrated residents who say the trees' roots are destroying their homes' foundations or creating speed bumps in their driveways.

Now, with last summer's wildfires fresh in Santa Cruz County

6-6-09 residents' minds, the heritage tree ordinance could be changed to allow many private property owners to more easily remove the invasive and very flammable acacia and blue gum eucalyptus trees. Because those trees grow quickly, many qualify as heri-

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tage trees relatively soon after they sprout. Once that happens, current city rules make them difficult to remove.

"In light of the fires last summer, the fire department really wants us to move forward with this. It's a critical move that we really must do," said Steve Hammack, superintendent of Santa Cruz parks.

The ordinance also could be rewritten to eliminate loopholes, duplicate fees and other confusing aspects that have exasperated those wanting to cut a tree or stop a tree's removal, supporters said.

Parks and Recreation Commissioner Kris Reyes compared the ordinance changes to "writing a C paper into an A paper." He said the changes, which are in progress, would allow the commission to better enforce the ordinance.

"It had a lot of loopholes, a lot of vague language so

when we were forced to interpret it we were unable to do so," Reyes said.

The ordinance has been a thorn in the side of some residents, as it required many property owners to fight for years before getting the necessary permits to remove a nuisance tree. In 2001, for example, a Westside resident finally received a permit to remove two Monterey cypress trees six years after a 30-foot limb fell on her home.

Councilman Ryan Coonerty said the rule changes are needed.

"It's always good to take a fresh look at some of these ordinances," Coonerty said, especially "the unintended consequence of protecting every eucalyptus tree in Santa Cruz."

The proposed changes will be discussed at the Parks and Recreation Commission meeting next month before moving on to the City Council. The commission typically meets the first Monday of each month, but could be rescheduled next month due to the Fourth of July holiday.