



**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT,
NEIGHBORHOODS, AND STRATEGIC
PLANNING DEPARTMENT**

M E M O R A N D U M

DATE: January 11, 2006
TO: Planning Commission
FROM: Erika Conkling, Associate Planner
SUBJECT: **Zoning text amendment to improve tree retention**

ISSUE:

- 1) What are the current requirements for tree retention in the City of Renton?
- 2) Do the tree retention requirements comply with the Comprehensive Plan?
- 3) Are the tree retention requirements consistent with the City of Renton Business Plan Goals for 2006-2011?

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends adopting amendments that would require tree retention from virtually all development. Developed lots less than 10,000 square feet should be exempt from tree retention requirements, but all other lots would need to comply in order to obtain a land use development permit. Tree retention would be focused on “protected trees”, which excludes very small trees, common nuisance trees, and trees that are diseased or damaged.

BACKGROUND SUMMARY

Tree retention is not mandated in Renton’s current development regulations. In fact, the section of code that addresses the issue is aptly titled “Tree Cutting and Land Clearing.” Tree retention can be required at the discretion of the reviewing official. Trees are really only required to be retained in critical areas. In the pre Growth Management era, this seemed adequate, however, now the City is required to accept its fair share of regional growth. As development continues in Renton and surrounding communities, trees and green open spaces have been squeezed out. In most cases, developers find it easier to completely clear a parcel and retain no trees. As a result, there is very little tree canopy in areas of development.

Tree retention is important for a number of reasons. Trees are part of a natural drainage system that allows for ground water recharge and prevents excessive erosion. Developed

areas near stands of retained vegetation have fewer storm water concerns because of the intact natural drainage system in such areas. Stands of trees are natural buffers against noise, hot summer sun, and cold winter wind. Trees naturally reduce pollution and provide clean oxygen through the process of transpiration. They also provide habitat and are aesthetically pleasing.

As a matter of policy, Renton supports the retention of trees. Comprehensive Plan objective CD-J and Policy CD-45 stress the importance of retaining existing vegetation as part of a citywide landscaping plan. Objective EN-F and Policies EN-24 and 25 discuss the importance of maintaining natural areas to assist with storm water control. The City's 2006-2011 Business Plan Goals similarly state that in order to fulfill its goal to "manage growth through sound urban planning" the City should "uphold a high standard of design and property maintenance throughout the City." Tree retention fits neatly into the policies Renton has adopted to guide the City.

Staff examined several different tree retention policies. While the City has broad policies supporting tree retention, and a broad authority supporting administrative interpretation of the retention in code, specific implementation and standards are lacking. The proposed draft would regulate the retention of trees that meet certain criteria: greater than eight inches (8") in diameter and in good health. Trees meeting these criteria would be defined as a "protected tree". Certain types of trees already established in the code as priority species to be removed would not be regulated. In addition to requiring the retention of protected trees in critical areas, the proposed code change would require retention of protected trees in any required perimeter landscape areas. Retention of protected trees in the interior of the lot would be required at 25% for residential developments and 5% for commercial and industrial developments.

While 25% retention may seem high, there would be a lot of flexibility in how trees were retained. A system of tree retention credits would provide double credit for trees retained in clusters or near critical area buffers. This provides incentives to retain trees in natural stands that provide the most benefit and better protect the trees from being blown down, root damage, and other problems. Developers could potentially opt out of tree retention completely, but to do so they would be required to plant replacement trees of at least a three-inch (3") diameter. The replacement ratio would be a one-to-one ratio, so a 24-inch diameter tree would require replacement with eight (8) three-inch (3") trees. Retention of trees spares the developer significant replanting costs.

Existing policies provide an exemption from permits for parcels less than one-half acre. Staff recommends that this threshold be lowered to 10,000-square foot lots. Developed lots less than 10,000 square feet in size would be exempt from tree retention requirements, unless they contain trees retained as part of a tree retention plan agreed to during platting. This would exempt nearly all existing homeowners from the retention requirements. In the future, however, homeowners in a plat subject to a tree retention plan would be required to replace any retained trees removed from their property. Undeveloped and partially developed lots up to one acre in size would be limited to removal of three trees per year without complying with tree retention requirements, and lots over an acre would be limited to removal of six trees.

The attached exhibits demonstrate how the retention requirements would affect a proposed subdivision currently being processed.

Exhibit 1- Tree Inventory Plan from a 60-lot subdivision. This shows all trees greater than six inches (6") in diameter. The subdivision is located in an area in which the zoning is split between R-8 and R-10.

Exhibit 2- Shows the clearing line for the subdivision. All trees within the outlined area are to be removed. Trees within the property lines, but outside of the clearing area are required to be retained under current standards because they are within a critical area or critical area buffer. These areas are set aside as native growth protection areas. Within the clearing line are 387 trees with a diameter of eight inches (8") or greater. If the proposed definition of protected tree excludes certain problematic species, the total number of protected trees within the clearing line is 221 trees. Under the proposed regulations, the developer would need to achieve credit for retaining 45 trees.

Exhibit 3- Under the proposed regulations, trees retained within 25 feet (25') of the critical area buffer count as double credit. Since trees within the critical area and buffer are required for retention, this credit helps preserve larger stands of trees in a more natural condition. The developer would only need to retain 23 trees within 25' of the buffer to obtain full retention credit. This could be easily accomplished with only minimal changes to the lot configuration.

Exhibit 4- Retaining the protected trees in the open space would yield two retention credits.

Exhibit 5- There is a forested stand in the southeast (upper right hand corner) of the property. The plan shows up to 63 tree credits in this area. Since only trees greater than 6" are shown, there may be additional credit for clusters of trees with at least a 3" diameter. If the developer shows these clusters on the tree inventory plan, three smaller trees in a cluster qualify as one tree credit. Reconfiguration of the lots and cul-de-sac, with the potential loss of one or two lots, could yield a large number of retention credits.

Exhibit 6 (not shown) - The developer could still remove all trees within the clearing line under the proposed regulations. However, in this scenario the developer would need to plant a minimum of 115 three-inch diameter (3") trees to replace those that were removed. This assumes a one-to-one replacement ratio (each inch of existing tree diameter removed replaced with one inch diameter of new tree) of the required 25% retention rate.

CONCLUSION

Given the current rate of development, much of the existing tree canopy in the City of Renton will be lost unless there are regulations in place for tree retention. Tree retention may reduce the number of lots that can be obtained from a piece of land, but proposed regulations are flexible enough to allow a variety of options.