

### Tree Removals and Replacements:

The City Can Improve Processes to Protect and Grow the Community Forest

A Report from the City Auditor Issued November 2022

http://www.sanjoseca.gov/auditor



### **Background**

- San José has 1.6 million trees on private property and public spaces.
- In February 2022, the City approved the Community Forest Management Plan and a request for this audit.
- DOT, PBCE, and Public Works are all involved overseeing or managing trees, along with PRNS.

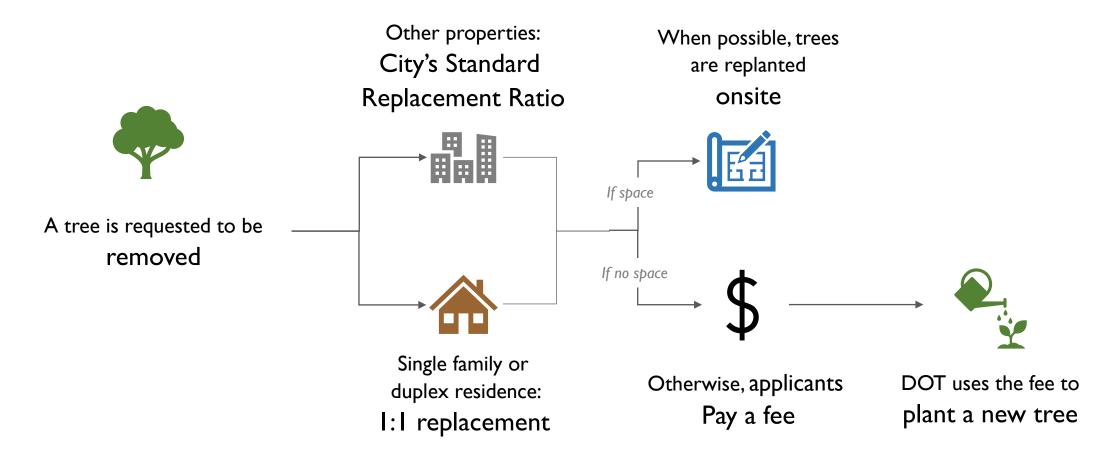
### The purpose of the audit was to review:

- a. how and whether the City is collecting tree-related mitigation fees from developers,
- b. how and whether the City is enforcing tree-planting conditions on development,
- c. how the City is spending tree mitigation funds, and
- d. how the City can most cost-effectively plant more trees.



### **Background**

#### **Exhibit: Private Property Tree Replacement Process**





## Finding I: Private Property Tree Removal Permitting Requires Better Resources and Improved Processes

- Nearly 1/3 of permits we reviewed had errors, resulting in 142 fewer trees planted or \$110,050 in in-lieu fees.
- Standard training and further guidance can improve the tree removal process.
- Planners do not have tree-related expertise. Guidance or arborist support would aid decision-making.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

#### PBCE should:

- → Develop procedures on tree removal permit processing
- → Provide planners with technical guidance about trees or provide further access to certified arborists



### Finding I: Private Property Tree Removal Permitting Requires Better Resources and Improved Processes

- In our sample, the process to review live tree removals exceeded the time recovered in the fee.
- CFMP recommendations may further impact the process.
- PBCE plans to review the fee and related process.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

#### PBCE should:

→ Review live tree removal fee and associated process.



# Finding 2: The City Can Better Ensure Replacement Trees are Planted and Regrowing the Canopy

- The City does not verify that applicants planted required replacement trees.
- There are two verification methods, but neither is performed routinely.
- The City determines the number of replacement trees without accounting for the canopy lost and does not provide guidance for suitable replacement tree species.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

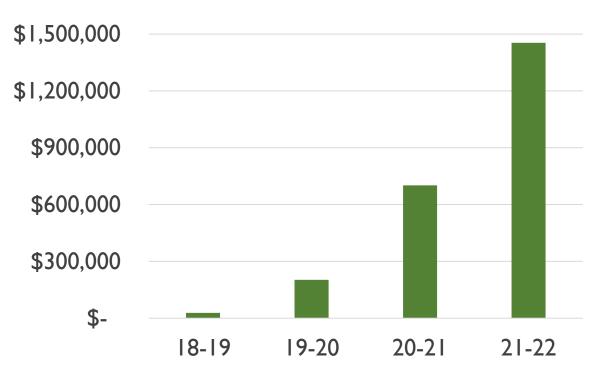
#### PBCE should:

- → Develop procedures to enforce tree planting requirements
- → Revise the tree replacement policy to incorporate canopy size and provide guidance for tree selection.



## Finding 3: DOT Has Not Been Spending In-Lieu Fees Timely

#### **Exhibit: Tree In-Lieu Fee Balances Have Grown**



Source: Auditor analysis of FMS and AMANDA fee records. Data indicates cumulative in-lieu fees collected less in-lieu fee spending by the end of each fiscal year.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

#### DOT should:

- → Identify planting locations or uses for accumulated fees
- → Create guidelines for how fees should be spent
- → Regularly review information on fee collection



## Finding 4: DOT Should Evaluate Costs and Establish Metrics for the Community Forest Program's Objectives

- The CFMP has multiple objectives for the community forest.
- DOT has several potential planting approaches, including City-funded and directed plantings or engaging private property owners in planting efforts.
- Each approach has varying costs and may be more or less effective in meeting a particular goal of the tree planting program.

#### **Costs include:**

- Procuring and planting the tree
- Site preparation
- Traffic safety measures
- Watering during establishment
- Future maintenance



## Finding 4: DOT Should Evaluate Costs and Establish Metrics for the Community Forest Program's Objectives

- Data on tree removals, replacements, and tree planting is limited.
- To measure how the City is meeting objectives, the City should track more data relating to tree planting, tree removals, and outreach efforts.
- Metrics would help the City evaluate cost effectiveness of planting approaches in meeting objectives.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

#### DOT should:

- → Develop metrics and work with PBCE on necessary data collection to measure progress toward the City's tree planting objectives
- → Work with the Community Forest Advisory Committee to develop an outreach plan



### **Conclusion**

This report has ten recommendations to improve the City's processes to protect and grow the community forest.

We would like to thank the Departments of Transportation; Planning, Building and Code Enforcement, and Public Works. We also thank the City Attorney's Office and the City Manager's Budget Office.

The audit report is available at <a href="https://www.sanjoseca.gov/auditor">www.sanjoseca.gov/auditor</a>

Audit staff: Alison Pauly, Michael O'Connell Jr., William McClain (Stanford in Government fellow)