

One For the Trees

A quiet breeze rustled some leaves in SLO on May 26.

That was the date on which the SLO City Planning Commission held its "Review of a Tentative Tract Map to Create 23 Residential Lots on a 4.98 acre lot," aka the 468 & 500 Westmont Avenue subdivision.

The Santa Lucia chapter joined with Save Our Downtown and nearly two dozen SLO residents in urging the Planning Commission to overrule city staff's recommendation to approve the tract map. The Sierra Club focused our comments on 17 trees located in a riparian corridor, and three redwoods elsewhere on site, all proposed to be removed to accommodate the applicant's project.

Staff is characterizing as a fire hazard trees that are, in fact, fire resistant, and citing the avoidance of revisions to the applicant's design as a rationale for approving the removal of trees from the site.

Cal Poly professor Jenn Yost states that satellite data has shown San Luis Obispo has only 13% canopy cover, referring to the amount of tree coverage citywide. With San Luis Obispo's urban canopy severely lacking, we pointed out that trees play a vital role in mitigating climate change, sequestering millions of tons of carbon that would otherwise pollute our climate. According to the [National Climate Assessment](#) from the U.S. Global Change Research Program, trees absorb and store the equivalent of 16 percent of all carbon dioxide emitted annually by fossil fuel burning in the United States.

We noted that "the project before you could serve as the place to begin a shift in the priorities with which the City approaches trees in a proposed development not as a potential hazard and/or inconvenience to be removed, but a public necessity to be preserved," and provided links* from the website of California ReLeaf, which works statewide to promote alliances among community-based groups, individuals, industry, and government agencies to preserve, protect, and enhance California's urban and community forests. They provide a wealth of information on the role of urban trees in stormwater management, how to credit trees for runoff and pollutant



reduction, and the role of trees in protecting city residents from excessive heat and helping to improve air and water quality.

Urban areas, which consume the majority of our resources, should minimize our impacts upon resources and the environment. We urged the city to begin asking applicants to incorporate on-site trees into their proposed projects.

The four Planning Commissioners (three absent) who reviewed the 468 & 500 Westmont Avenue subdivision on May 26 voted to continue this item to their meeting of June 23, with the understanding that the applicant would return with alternative grading and circulation concepts that might result in the preservation of more trees and reduce traffic impacts on the existing neighborhoods. There was a consensus that the project as submitted is a “lost opportunity” because the applicant had not yet shown the “flexibility” needed to capitalize on the inherent beauty of this site.

The June 23 meeting of the Planning Commission was subsequently canceled, with the decision on the fate of the trees of the Westmont Subdivision continued to “date uncertain.”

*[Website: Green Infrastructure](#) (American Society of Landscape Architects)
[Article: Making Urban Trees Count](#) (Center for Watershed Protection)