

Speaking up for Street Trees

By Chris Benz

Street trees do more than beautify neighborhoods; they provide essential infrastructure services. According to a 2020 report from the National Institute of Health, trees directly remove air pollutants, intercept stormwater runoff, and provide shade, which can lower local air temperatures and reduce building cooling costs. The loss of mature street trees is particularly significant, as they offer greater environmental benefits than smaller trees.

Following the removal of 41 street trees on Coombs Street as part of the city's Measure T repaving project, Maureen Trippe is on a mission to replace these trees.

"Street trees save energy, increase property values, reduce stormwater runoff, and make our lives more comfortable and beautiful," Trippe said.

Trippe views tree replacement as crucial not only for restoring shade canopy and enhancing climate resilience but also as an investment in traffic calming. As the co-founder of Slow Down Napa, a grassroots organization focused on curbing speeding in residential neighborhoods, she brings her passion for community safety to this initiative.

"The amazing thing is that trees have been shown to reduce vehicle speeds and calm traffic," Trippe explained. "Why? Because trees create the appearance that the road is narrower, making drivers feel more relaxed in their presence. Without trees, open spaces give drivers the illusion of control, leading to faster speeds. If a street resembles a highway, people will treat it like one. Trees are the best traffic calming measures we can invest in."

The city has plans for street tree replacement on Coombs Street as part of its ongoing Capital Improvement Project. This includes new trees, a bike lane, traffic safety improvements, street paving, and sidewalk repair. However, Trippe noted that the tree replacement plan lacks provisions to fill existing street tree gaps. Additionally, there is no guarantee that every tree removed will be replaced with a new tree, since the removal site, typically located in the public right-of-way between the sidewalk and the curb, may not easily accommodate a replacement tree.

Stringent city requirements dictate tree locations and types to prevent roots from interfering with water meters and driveways, and to ensure branches don't obstruct overhead utility lines. Additionally, a \$205 application fee to plant a street tree must be paid by the property owner, who is also responsible for planting and watering the tree. For various reasons—cost, aesthetics, or commitment—not every property owner will choose to participate in the city's street tree program.

The new Urban Forestry Management Plan will help identify street tree "opportunity sites" and track all trees removed by developers or city projects. However, the best way to address these sites remains uncertain - the city owns this street tree space, but the trees require care and commitment from property owners.

A robust tree replanting strategy for a project of this scale requires more than optional participation from property owners on a case-by-case basis. Trippe emphasized that plans for tree replacement and filling opportunity sites should be integral to the scope of work and budget for future street rehabilitation projects.

Trippe has taken Bernie Narvaez, her City Council member, on a tour of the Coombs Street trees and has also met with city staff from Public Works to discuss how to fill the street tree gaps.

“Repaving projects need to consider what truly matters to the neighborhood –they are not just engineering projects,” she asserted. “I hope the Coombs Street project and its tree replacement efforts can serve as a model for better preserving and restoring the city’s valuable tree canopy. The carbon sequestered by trees and the shade their canopies provide are clear climate benefits for the community.”

Tree replanting aligns with the city’s climate action goals and emphasizes the importance of creating a sustainable future. Each tree planted represents a step toward improving the urban landscape and fostering a safer, more vibrant community.

Actions you can take:

1. Apply for a street tree at the City of Napa Parks and Recreation site (<https://www.cityofnapa.org/DocumentCenter/View/12546/Tree-Planting-Application---Updated-22525-pdf>).
2. If you own your home, consider planting additional trees on your property.
3. Share your view of trees at a city council meeting.

Chris Benz is a retired winemaker and co-founder of Napa Climate NOW! Napa Climate NOW! is a local nonprofit citizens’ group advocating for smart climate solutions based on the latest climate science, part of 350 Bay Area. Info, napa.350bayareorg

Photo Credit: Chris Benz

Photo Caption: Napa City Council member Bernie Narvaez and Maureen Trippe with one of the mature street trees on Coombs St.

