

Tree ordinance changes eyed

Sarasota considers revising rules to give homeowners flexibility over planting, removing

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The city of Sarasota is considering changing its **tree ordinance** to give homeowners more flexibility when it comes to planting or removing trees in their yards.

The city's **Tree** Advisory Committee has developed a list of recommendations for how to improve Sarasota's **tree ordinance**. For these recommendations to be adopted, the City Commission will have to amend the **ordinance**.

"The TAC recommendations provide a great deal more flexibility," said Assistant City Attorney Joe Mladinich at Tuesday's commission meeting, where the board discussed the **tree ordinance**. When residents remove a **tree** from their yard, they generally need to plant one or more new trees to replace the one cut down, or pay the city a fee.

The **ordinance** requires trees with a diameter of over 30 inches to be replaced with three trees that are at least 7 inches in diameter. When a 16- to 30-inch **tree** is cut down, it must be replaced with two trees that are at least 5 inches in diameter. And when a 4- to 15-inch **tree** is removed, it must be replaced with a **tree** that's at least 3 inches in diameter.

The advisory committee is advising the city to decrease the minimum size of required replacement trees. Their recommendation is that for canopy trees, the replacement trees must have a minimum diameter of 3 inches, and for all other trees, the replacement trees must have a minimum diameter of 2 inches.

Smaller replacement trees allow homeowners to plant a greater variety of species, Mladinich said.

See TREES, Page 10C

Continued from Page 1C

"It's also a lower cost to the person who's having the **tree** removed," he said.

Residents would need to replace every inch of the removed **tree**, though, by either planting several trees, planting a larger **tree** or paying fees, according to the committee's recommendations.

The committee has also made several other recommendations, including allowing residential property owners to remove trees for re-landscaping. Homeowners wouldn't have to plant new trees or pay any fees if they only remove, at most, 25% of their existing **tree** canopy. This would allow them to have more open space in their yard and add in structures like a pool or sundeck.

But Commissioner Hagen Brody wants to give residents even more flexibility recommended by the panel. At the commission meeting, he recommended that homeowners be allowed to remove any **tree** except for grand trees, like live oaks.

“My feeling is it should be up to our residents what kind of **tree** they plant in their yard,” he said.

Commissioners also made other comments on Tuesday about the recommendations, and city staff will incorporate the commissioners’ suggestions as well their own in a revised version of the **tree ordinance**. The commission will discuss and potentially vote on the revised **ordinance** at a future meeting.

Mladinich said that Brody’s idea will not be included in the revised **ordinance**, but city staff will provide the commission with an outline of how Brody’s recommended **changes** would impact the **ordinance**.

Commissioner Jen Ahearn-Koch made a motion on Tuesday to approve the committee’s recommendations, with some revisions, but her motion failed in 3-2 vote. She thought that the city should follow the recommendations of the **Tree** Advisory Committee instead of Brody’s idea. She noted that the committee met many times, and was composed of neighborhood residents, developers and other stakeholders.

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