

**CITY OF ALBANY
CITY COUNCIL AGENDA
STAFF REPORT**

Agenda Date: October 18, 2021

Reviewed by: NA

SUBJECT: Update on Eucalyptus on Albany Hill and Authorization of Funding for the Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project (CIP No. 41015).

REPORT BY: Margot Cunningham, Natural Areas Coordinator
Mark Hurley, Public Works Director/City Engineer

SUMMARY

The purpose of this agenda item is to provide the City Council a status report on the condition of eucalyptus trees on Albany Hill and present a plan for future work. The Council is also being asked to approve establishment of a Capital Improvement Project and appropriate funding.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

That the Council receive the presentation, and adopt Resolution No. 2021-105, authorizing establishment of the Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project (CIP No. 41015) and appropriating \$100,000 from remaining Measure R capital funds for the project.

BACKGROUND

On June 7 City Council received a [report](#) (Attachment 4) on the status of the condition of eucalyptus on Albany Hill. At that time staff showed Council photos of the declining trees on the hill. Staff reported that they had retained a consulting arborist (SBCA Tree Consulting) to conduct an inspection of trees near roads and trails to evaluate the near-term risk to residences, vehicles, and passers-by. The arborist submitted a report to staff on July 23, 2021.

Staff also briefed Council about a study sampling declining eucalyptus for pathogens by researchers from UC Berkeley. The sampling study was reported to the Parks Recreation and Open Space Commission at their [May 2021 meeting](#) (Attachment 5). Results of the pathogen study became available on September 21, 2021.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Scientific Findings

A. [Arborist Report](#)

The consulting arborists conducted a TRAQ Level 2 tree safety assessment for all eucalyptus trees on City property on Albany Hill for which a root, trunk, or branch failure could potentially cause damage or injury along roadways or trails. Criteria used to determine individual tree removals was based on significant branch tip dieback, presence of internal decay, and root stability concerns.

They assessed 390 eucalyptus trees and concluded that most of them are in poor or fair health as a result of very low soil moisture, pathogen attack, and internal decay. The trees are not able to produce enough carbohydrates to grow new wood, which is needed to combat the internal decay found in many of the trees.

The arborists recommended the following:

1. High priority removals of dead or dying trees that pose an immediate danger to public safety. (Staff had a tree company remove 14 trees and prune one.)
2. Remove all eucalyptus east of the crest fire road, many trees west of the crest fire road, most of the trees along the trail between Taft and Jackson, and most of the trees along Jackson and Taft (see map in Appendix 2 of the report).
3. Some of the trees in the butterfly habitat that have been recommended for removal could be retained if they are cleared by a TRAQ Level 3 safety assessment. (In December staff will meet with another arborist about conducting this higher-level assessment on trees in the monarch clustering areas.)
4. The City should consider removing other trees that do not currently have a significant safety rating because stands of trees act together to resist wind forces and the remaining trees will be subject to increased wind once other trees are removed.

B. Eucalyptus Dieback Report (Pathogen Study)

Results of the study on Blue Gum Eucalyptus dieback revealed that a leaf blight fungus was found at all six Bay Area sites sampled, including Albany Hill, and another leaf pathogen was found at 4 of the 6 sites. Common symptoms at all sites were brown foliage and twig cankers.

The leaf blight fungus is specific to the Eucalyptus genus and is present in Eucalyptus trees planted worldwide. It is a latent pathogen, meaning it is harmless or even beneficial until the tree becomes physiologically stressed.

The study concluded that the dieback of Eucalyptus is strongly driven by environmental stress – drought, increasing temperatures, decreasing fog – combined with latent pathogens taking advantage of the compromised health of the trees.

The author and funders of the study are still working on formal Best Management Practices, but preliminary recommendations in the Report are:

1. In drier sites eliminate stands of Blue Gum Eucalyptus. They are not adapted to the recent warmer and drier climate.
2. If stands or individual trees are to be maintained, thin the weakest trees and remove from the site leaves, twigs, and branches, which contain most of the pathogen load. Alternatively, leave the debris on site and spread soil on top or compost the debris on site.

Specific to Albany Hill, which is an overwintering site for monarchs, the investigator recommended cleaning up the site as much as possible after tree removal in the overwintering habitat and planting a variety of trees that are drought tolerant.

Land managers will have to weigh costs and benefits of treatments. The benefits gained from recommended treatments may be outweighed by the increased costs associated with them and increased delays caused by them.

Recommendations and BMP's are meant as guidelines to decrease the spread of pathogens. Land managers should do as much as is practical and within their budgets.

C. Water stress readings

A Cal Fire Forest Health Specialist conducted water stress readings on eucalyptus leaf stems in June and August 2021. The readings revealed that eucalyptus on the crest of the hill were highly stressed and eucalyptus lower down along Jackson St on the east side of the hill were mildly stressed. Because of drought conditions less water is available to the trees and the demand for water by the trees is greater.

D. Fuel Assessment and Monarch Habitat Analysis Studies

These studies are underway and staff will provide an update on them at a future meeting. A recognized leader in wildland fire management is assessing fire hazards in all open spaces on the hill and will provide recommendations. The biologist who conducted the initial Monarch habitat study is conducting a more detailed habitat assessment in relation to fire management treatments on all open spaces.

Project Plan and Timeline

Information and recommendations from these scientific studies will guide staff in putting together a plan for large-scale removal of Eucalyptus, erosion mitigation, and subsequent habitat restoration. Staff is seeking assistance from forestry and biology professionals in preparing and implementing this plan.

Alternative approaches of phased removal vs. removal all at once will be weighed. Protection of existing native plants, including coast live oaks growing in the understory of the eucalyptus, will be addressed as well as restoration of native plant and monarch habitat after removals. Vegetation communities with lower fire hazards, soil stabilization, and erosion prevention will be important elements of the plan as well.

Staff will confer with landowners of private parcels on scientific findings and approaches to tree management and habitat protection on their properties.

Staff is currently researching grants to fund the majority of the work on this large-scale project. Development of a comprehensive plan for the scope of work will inform grant application strategy and help determine the programs under which the project would be the most competitive for funding.

Estimated timeline:

- Develop Capital Project plan, scope of work, and team of consultants: 6 to 12 months
- CEQA and other approvals: 3 to 6 months
- Design final plan and obtain contractors: 3 to 6 months
- Execute plan: 6 to 12 months

These phases will likely be generally concurrent and grant funding will be pursued all through this timeline.

Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Commission and City Council will be apprised of progress at regular intervals throughout this timeline.

Short-term Mitigations

Until a plan is determined, Fire Department and Public Works staff will inspect the hill daily and engage an arborist to perform periodic hazard assessments. If certain trees look like they may pose an immediate hazard or are identified as hazardous by the arborist, steps will be taken to trim or remove them. The vegetation maintenance contractor, Urban Tilth, will continue fire-reduction work on the hill, including pruning limbs away from fire roads, removing downed bark and branches, and mowing grasses.

SUSTAINABILITY CONSIDERATIONS

The ongoing goal for this project will be to maintain vegetation for fire safety and access while also restoring native ecosystems.

The project is consistent with the goals, policies, and actions of the following plans:

City of Albany Climate Action and Adaptation Plan 2019, Goal 3: Increase resilience of natural lands and systems. Approach: Manage, restore, and partner to foster resilient natural landscapes. events Action 4.3.2 Continue to manage wildfire risk by implementing vegetation management and fuel reduction programs.

Albany 2035 General Plan, Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Element:

Action	PROS-1.B:	Creekside	Master	Plan	Implementation
Implement the open space management recommendations of the 2012 Creekside Master Plan, including vegetation management, trail improvements, signage and other park improvements					

Policy PROS-3.7: Vegetation Management Ensure that park landscaping and maintenance practices are consistent with City policies to reduce wildfire hazards and manage vegetation. These practices should also reinforce City programs to conserve water, promote Bay-friendly landscaping such as native, non-invasive, drought- tolerant plants, and use reclaimed water for irrigation

Albany 2035 General Plan, Conservation and Sustainability Element:

Policy CON-1.3: Conservation of Albany Hill: Protect and restore natural features, native vegetation, and wildlife on Albany Hill.

Policy CON-2.5: Albany Hill Vegetation Management: Protect the remaining native plant communities on Albany Hill. Vegetation on the Hill should be managed in a way that gradually reduces the extent of the eucalyptus forest and encourages native plants to return.

Action CON-2.D: Creekside Master Plan Implementation: Implement the vegetation management prescriptions of the Albany Hill Creekside Master Plan, and periodically update the Plan as conditions change.

Action CON-2.G: Native Plant Restoration: Preserve and enhance native plant communities in the city while encouraging the control or removal of invasive and non-native species.

Policy CON-5.3: Monarch Butterfly Roosting: Consider potential impacts to Monarch butterfly roosting sites on Albany Hill in any future applications for development, park expansion, trail construction, and fuel reduction on the Hill.

Action CON-5.D: Monarch Butterfly Surveys: For construction projects that would affect eucalyptus, pine, and cypress groves during the period between September and March, require pre-construction surveys by a qualified biologist to determine if roosting Monarch butterflies are present. In the event winter colonies are identified, require appropriate measures to avoid impacts, such as postponing tree removal until butterflies have left or by designating buffer areas around the affected trees.

SOCIAL EQUITY AND INCLUSIVITY CONSIDERATIONS

During this project ongoing vegetation management work by the Watershed Stewardship Restoration Field Crew of Urban Tilth is critical to keeping Albany Hill safe from fire hazards as well as helping to restore ecosystems on the hill.

Agenda item 7-9 (Attachment 6) from the March 1, 2021 City Council meeting details the long-term contract with Urban Tilth and their Watershed Stewardship Program that has been employing and empowering young adults who live in Richmond and surrounding communities.

CITY COUNCIL STRATEGIC PLAN INITIATIVES

This project is consistent with:

The City of Albany Strategic Plan Goal 3 Maximize and Improve Parks and Open Space,

- Objective 2 Enhance Open Space,
 - Item 1: Develop a prioritized list of projects on Albany Hill and include in the CIP program, and
 - Item 2: Develop a forest management plan for Albany Hill including fuel load analysis.

FINANCIAL SUMMARY

Measure R (Lighting & Landscaping Assessment District 1996-1) was approved by voters in the November 1996 election. The measure was intended to fund three distinct open space related goals:

- One half (50%) of the money raised would be used to acquire available land on Albany Hill and to improve and maintain the land as open space.
- One quarter (25%) of the money raised would be used to acquire, improve, develop, and maintain land for recreational playing fields available to Albany residents.
- One quarter (25%) of the money raised would be used to improve, restore, develop, and maintain creeks that run through or on the border of Albany.

The final levy of this 25-year revenue collection took place in fiscal year 2018-19, in tandem with the introduction of Measure M, which was approved by voters in 2018 (Ordinance No. 2018-05, see Measure M Parks & Open Space Parcel Tax webpage [here](#) or Attachment 7).

Of the remaining total balance of \$1.75M* at the end of fiscal year 2020-21, the City has committed and programmed the following:

- \$620,000 to Phase IV of the Codornices Creek Restoration Project
- \$175,000 to parks, creeks, & open space maintenance in the Public Works operating budget for fiscal year 2021-2022
- \$110,000 for Parks projects programmed in the FY20-24 CIP

Remaining funds will be programmed within the Public Works operating budget for parks, creeks & open space maintenance (see Biennial Budget Booklet, Section 3.3.8.) as well as towards further CIP projects until such funds are exhausted.

* The above noted total balance is subject to adjustment as per the findings of the fiscal year 2020-21 audit when finalized.

Staff recommends an appropriation of funds for the Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project (CIP No. 41015) as follows:

Project Element	Estimated Cost
High level (TRAQ 3) Tree safety assessment	\$20,000
Tree removal/habitat restoration plan development	\$20,000
CEQA/approvals process	\$20,000
Contingency	\$40,000
Total Projected Expenditures:	\$100,000

Funding Source	Budget
Measure R LLAD 1996-1 Funds	\$100,000
Total Appropriation:	\$100,000

Contingency is included to support short-term mitigation efforts or additional professional services needed during this project phase, as per discussion above.

Staff is currently sourcing grant funding options to support future phases of the project.

Attachments:

1. Resolution No. 2021-105
2. Arborist Report
3. Eucalyptus Dieback Report
4. City Council Staff Report – 6/7/2021
5. Parks, Recreation & Open Space Staff Report – 5/13/2021
6. City Council Staff Report – 3/1/2021
7. Albany Measure M Parks & Open Space Parcel Tax web page