



CITY OF ALBANY CITY COUNCIL AGENDA STAFF REPORT

Agenda Date: September 5, 2023
Reviewed by: NA

SUBJECT: City Council Study Session on Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project (CIP No. 41015) – Development of the Albany Hill Forest Management and Habitat Restoration Plan

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SUMMARY

The City of Albany's Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project (CIP No. 41015) was established on October 18, 2021. The purpose of this agenda item is for the Council to receive a summary of actions completed on the Project and intended next steps, as well as for Council to provide feedback and guidance on the Project.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

That the Council:

1. Receive a presentation regarding the Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project; and
2. Provide feedback and direction on the Project

BACKGROUND

In the Fall of 2020, staff noticed a sudden decline in the health of many of the Eucalyptus trees on Albany Hill, matching the observations of other professionals in other East Bay communities. That following winter and spring, staff partnered with researchers at UC Berkeley and the US Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Research Station, who collected samples and performed in-depth scientific analysis.

On June 7, 2021, City Council received a [report](#) on the status of the condition of Blue Gum 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 the study sampling declining eucalyptus for pathogens by researchers from UC Berkeley. The sampling study was reported to the Parks Recreation &

Open Space Commission at their [May 2021 meeting](#). Results of the [pathogen study](#) became available on September 21, 2021.

In the summer of 2021, after going through a bidding process, staff worked with a tree company to prune a large limb of one tree and cut down 13 trees deemed as high priority removals. This work took place in September 2021.

On October 18, 2021, staff [updated](#) the Council on the findings of the following reports: Albany Hill Eucalyptus Tree Survey from SBCA Tree Consulting, Eucalyptus Dieback Report from UC Berkeley, and Water Stress Readings Report from Cal Fire. Staff also provided an update on studies on fuel loads and monarch habitat. At that meeting Council adopted [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.

On May 2, 2022, Council adopted [Resolution No. 2022-41](#), which authorized staff to submit an application to the Coastal Conservancy for a Wildfire Resilience Grant in the amount of \$230,000 for the Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project (CIP No. 41015) and associated activities. On September 22, 2022 the Coastal Conservancy [awarded](#) the City the grant in full.

Staff presented findings from a [higher-level tree assessment](#), conducted by McNeil Arboriculture Consultants, at the May 12, 2022 Parks Recreation & Open Space Commission meeting as well as an overall update on activities on Albany Hill.

In September 2022, staff worked with Cal Fire National Guard Hand Crews to fell 13 more trees deemed as high priority removals, and logs from select trees were milled onsite by Bay Area Redwood into lumber for retaining walls and railings on the hill. This pilot project highlighted ways that material from future felled trees can be kept onsite and reused.

At the December 8, 2022 Parks, Recreation & Open Space Commission meeting, staff shared findings from the almost-completed fire fuel load and expanded monarch habitat studies as well as an overall update on the activities on Albany Hill.

Earlier this year the City received completed studies on [fire fuel load risk](#) and [assessment of monarch habitat](#) on all open spaces of Albany Hill. The results of these studies, which will be incorporated into Plan development as well as inform the City's ongoing vegetation management activities, will be presented to Council as part of this agenda item.

On March 28, 2023, the City sent out a Request for Proposals on the Albany Hill Forest Management and Habitat Restoration Plan, and on April 19, 2023 the City received and opened three (3) proposals for the development of the Project. Staff selected the proposal from Restoration Design Group (RDG)/Nomad Ecology and [Council awarded](#) Contract No. C23-40 to RDG on June 20, 2023.

DISCUSSION

As outlined in the Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project (CIP Project No. 41015) the City seeks to develop a plan for phased removal of dead and declining eucalyptus trees on City property. This plan will include but is not limited to: plantings of other tall trees in areas of the hill where monarchs have traditionally clustered; survey of the existing native understory which will be allowed to grow after eucalyptus removal; and analysis and design of additional plantings of Albany Hill-sourced native plants. This project element includes CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) analysis and compliance as necessary.

Results of 2022 studies on fire fuel load risk and expanded assessment of monarch habitat:

Wildland fire consultants, Carol Rice and Cheryl Miller, conducted an assessment of fuel loads on all open spaces on the hill. The study builds upon the 2012 Creekside Albany Hill Vegetation Management Plan and sets a foundation for multi-owner grant proposals and management to reduce fire hazards on the entire hill.

The consultants came up with fuel models, which are characteristics of vegetation, including amounts, depth, size, and arrangement. They added the fuel models, weather conditions, and fuel moisture conditions into a computer program to predict fire behavior. Fire behavior is the way a fire reacts to the influences of fuel, weather, and topography. Fire behavior outputs are flame length, fire line intensity, rate of spread, crown fire activity, and spotting distance. The consultants produced maps showing these outputs for Albany Hill and the surrounding community.

Rice and Miller, who worked with monarch biologist Stuart Weiss to integrate into their report information about protecting habitat for monarch butterflies, emphasized that to preserve monarch habitat all other parts of the hill will need to be kept in a low fire hazard state.

Stuart Weiss, Ph.D., chief scientist at Creekside Science, conducted an assessment of monarch habitat on all open spaces on the hill. The purpose of the study was to see what areas and vegetation structure provide the best conditions for monarchs and how to maintain those conditions.

Weiss's study shows two core overwintering sites and associated shelterbelts on the west slope of the hill. Monarchs require protection from wind so they don't get too cold while they are overwintering. They are resting before they migrate inland to breed. Taller trees on the west slope provide a primary windbreak. A key shelterbelt on the west slope consists of trees and shrubs that provides ground to middle story wind shelter and is essential for monarchs using the lower cluster sites.

Recommendations from Weiss include:

1. Trees damaged from the June 2022 fire may recover and provide wind shelter, and Weiss urges caution in removing them.

2. Standing dead trees and branches don't provide monarch habitat and will eventually fall and damage live trees. Remove when monarchs are not overwintering.
3. Fuel treatments within 100 ft east of high rises along Pierce would not affect monarch habitat, but treatments in the key shelterbelt on the west slope would compromise critical wind shelter for clusters uphill.
4. Replacements trees for blue gums can include alternative drought-resistant eucalyptus species.
5. Gaps in the middlestory can be filled with coast live oak and toyon. Many are already growing there--nurture those and plant more.
6. Remove piles of fallen dead material throughout the hill to decrease fire hazards.

Consultant Presentation:

The consultants selected for development of the Albany Hill Forest Management and Habitat Restoration Plan, Restoration Design Group (RDG) and their subcontractor, Nomad Ecology, will present their vision, scope, and methodology at this meeting.

Afterwards staff is interested in hearing from City Council Members about gaps in information or considerations they may see in Project development to this point. A collaborative and decisive process will avoid delays in getting this critical Project completed.

SUSTAINABILITY CONSIDERATIONS

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

Development of the Albany Hill Forest Management and Habitat Restoration Plan will involve soliciting feedback from community members and organizations through multiple avenues of community outreach. In addition, the City and Consultant will engage members of the Sogorea Te and Lisjan Ohlone in Plan development.

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. Their Watershed Stewardship Program employs and empowers young adults who live in Richmond and surrounding communities. Development of the Plan will create future work for the Urban Tilth crew in planting and maintenance of vegetation communities on the hill.

CITY COUNCIL STRATEGIC PLAN INITIATIVES

Goal 6: Increase Public Health, Safety, and Resiliency

California has seen increased rate of forest deterioration and wildfire activity in recent years due to climate change. Among other impacts, drought-stricken trees are more susceptible to pathogen-related decay and decline. Addressing the overall health and resiliency of the Albany Hill forest, managing the declining eucalyptus, and designing a thoughtful and holistic plan for long-term habitat restoration is essential to ensuring the longevity of this natural resource.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project (CIP No. 41015), as noted previously, was established in October 2021 and budget was appropriated from local Lighting & Landscaping Assessment District 1996-1 (LLAD 1996-1, Measure R) fund balance. Additionally, the City applied for and was awarded a Wildfire Resilience Program Grant from the State Coastal Conservancy for the Albany Hill Eucalyptus Project (CIP No. 41015) as well as associated activities.

<u>Funding Sources</u>	<u>Amount</u>	<u>Resolution No.</u>
2302 Measure R – Open Space Capital Funds	\$100,000	2021-105
1506 Grant Funds	\$230,000	2022-41
Total	\$330,000	

The Coastal Conservancy-approved budget for the grant funds is as follows. (Table 2)

<u>Task Number</u>	<u>Task Title</u>	<u>Grant Funds</u>	<u>Description</u>
1	Project Management	\$0	Staff Time – In Kind (Public Works)
2	Forest Management & Habitat Restoration Plan Development	\$140,000	CIP No. 41015
3	Fire Safety Maintenance	\$60,000	Urban Tilth Contract Extension
4	Education & Research	\$30,000	Habitat Restoration Internship Program & Sogorea Te/Lisjan Partnership
	Total Grant Funds:	\$230,000	

To date, \$12,194 of the allocated LLAD 1996-1 (Measure R) budget for CIP No. 41015 has been expended, with \$87,806 remaining.

Attachments

1. Characterizations of Fuels, Fire Hazards, and Recommendations, Albany Hill, Albany, CA
2. Assessment of Drought and Fire Impacts and Fuel Management on Monarch Butterfly Habitat on Albany Hill