

To: Merced City Council, City Manager and City Attorney

Sept. 6, 2016

From: Michael Belluomini

Ref: Replacement of Trees in Public Parks and Streets

**BACKGROUND:** The City of Merced has over 80,000 trees in public places such as parks and along streets. The City is designated a "Tree City USA" because it is committed to ensuring that trees are a prominent characteristic of the city, and it is committed to provide funding, staffing and policy direction to promote trees in public places/thoroughfares. This commitment is codified in Municipal Code Section 14.12. Street trees benefit the city by increasing property values through improved curb appeal, by improving air quality and reducing the summer temperature, by increasing people on the streets thereby deterring crime, and improving the overall attractiveness of the city. The city budget includes replacement of 200 trees annually.

In March 2015, the governor declared a drought emergency which required the city to reduce water use by 36% or face fines. In response, the city completely stopped watering public parks, street median island landscaping, and street trees/landscaping in maintenance/community facility districts. In May 2015, the city showed that it had reduced water use by 42% compared to the previous year. After two and a half months of not watering, the city began watering once a week in June 2015. It rained 1.25 inches during this period. In August, watering twice a week resumed. This pattern of eliminating and reducing irrigation contributed to public trees dying.

The public trees of the city are irrigated either by the city or by the adjoining property owner. In street medians, and parks the city waters trees. In 85 maintenance/community facility districts, the city irrigates trees, shrubs etc. with special taxes collected annually from the property owners in the district. It is reasonable for property owners paying taxes for landscape maintenance in their district to expect that the city, will at a minimum, keep the landscaping alive. The governor's suggested wording for a model city water conservation ordinance states that "maintenance of landscaping within active public parks and playing fields ..." are uses for which the requirement to comply with mandatory conservation measures such as stopping all landscape irrigation "shall not apply".

**THE PROBLEM:** Since April 2015, the city has removed approximately 500 dead trees. These trees died as a result of the lack of irrigation and the lack of rain according to staff. The City Public Works Department estimates that approximately an equal number of 500 dead/dying trees need to be removed. So there is a need to replace approximately 1,000 trees in public places. Those removed in public parks, street median islands, and maintenance/community facility districts can be replaced with an assurance that the city has the control of the watering. It is estimated that there are 500

of these trees with city controlled irrigation needing replacement. Street trees rely on the adjoining property owner to provide irrigation as required by city ordinance. It is estimated that there are 500 of these street trees needing replacement.

The cost of replacing trees is consistent for planting a new tree at \$200 (24" box). However, the cost of removing the dead tree varies based on the tree's size. Large trees cost \$900 to remove, while small ones cost less than \$100. At an average of \$700 per tree to remove the dead tree and replace it approximately \$700,000 is needed. The city budget includes \$30,671 for street tree replacement/removal. There may be some funding available in maintenance/community facility districts accounts.

THE PROPOSAL: Direct staff to prepare a plan to address the loss of trees in public places to include four components as follows:

- 1) In the maintenance/community facility districts where property owners paid taxes to maintain their landscaping, yet it died, the city ought to remove dead trees/shrubs and replace them and ensure adequate irrigation.
- 2) In the parks where mature trees and shrubs represent a legacy left for us to enjoy and where not even the governor proposed eliminating irrigation, the city ought to remove dead trees and replace them and ensure adequate irrigation.
- 3) In street median islands which are in the main streets of the city and form the "face" and "living room" of the city, trees ought to be replaced and irrigated in a reliable manner.
- 4) Street trees throughout the city should be replaced first on the main streets and then on the smaller streets and only if the assurance of the adjacent property owner or resident to water the tree can be obtained.

"Replacement" means on a one for one basis with no reduction of trees from what existed previously. All of these tree replacement actions are one-time expenses, not ongoing expenses and staff should recommend the best funding plan to the council. City staff is unable to fulfill its usual duties and take on replacement of 1,000 trees within a year, therefore, the work should be put out to competitive bid for award to a contractor.