

Trees' cutting halted for now

By Melanie Turner
Enterprise staff writer

A plan to take care of a problem the city has dealt with for years — how PG&E trims trees under power lines — was circumvented, at least temporarily, Monday when a handful of Core Area residents turned out to stop the job a contractor was hired to do.

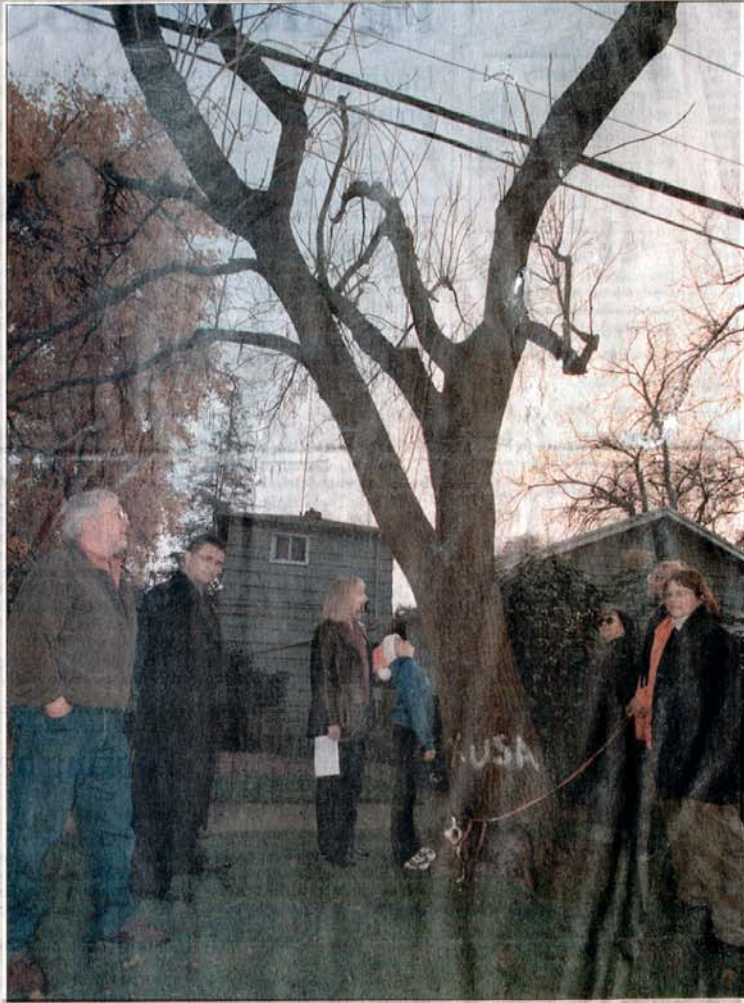
A foreman under contract with PG&E was scheduled to cut down about 11 trees on seven properties, mostly on the south side of Seventh Street between B and C streets. Each property owner had signed a release allowing the trees to be removed, said city arborist Ken Nunes.

In July, the city Parks Department, along with PG&E, came up with a plan to solve the problem of ugly prunings under power lines. It's called: The Right Tree in the Right Place. Monday's job was to be a first step in initiating that plan, Nunes said.

But four concerned residents managed to stop the tree removals.

Downtown activist John Lofland noticed no-parking signs and yellow X's marking the trees, and asked residents in the area what was going on. That's when he learned of the trees' fate.

Concerned about a lack of public notice, Lofland alerted the police and the mayor. He also called city parks superintendent



Greg Rihl/Enterprise photo

RALLYING: Neighbors look at a tree on Seventh Street between B and C streets that is targeted for removal by PG&E as being a nuisance under its

power lines. From left are John Lofland, Norman Ritley, Christine Cippery, Mary Catherine Dundon, Lyn Lofland, Dennis Dingemans and Robin Dattel.

TREES

From Page A1

dent Bob Cordrey to the scene.

Neighbors say they are most interested in having some public discussion and consideration before such action is taken. Mature trees like these are part of the fabric of their neighborhood, they say.

Robin Dattel, who lives around the corner on C Street, said while the trees may need to come down she believes there should be broader consultation among residents in the area. Street trees concern more than just the property owners that abut them, she said.

"I think there's widespread affection for and interest in street trees in our neighborhood and beyond," Dattel said.

Rick Karban, also a resident of C Street, agreed he would like greater public discussion and awareness before mature trees are cut down.

A professor of entomology and ecology at UC Davis, Karban said the valley oak may be the best tree in the city for attracting song birds. There is one oak among those to be cut down.

"I don't fancy the idea of PG&E removing all of the trees on that block because it's less expensive or more convenient for them than pruning the trees and managing them properly," he said. "I'd also like to be informed on decisions like that because they have a big influence on my neighborhood."

When Cordrey arrived at the scene Monday, he opted to stop the job and regroup. Arborist Nunes, who had been most closely involved in arranging the job, was not at work Monday.

Reached Tuesday, Nunes wondered at first whether PG&E would still be willing to carry out the Right Tree in the Right Place plan after Monday.

"PG&E is the good guy in this," he said. "They're going out of their way to be decent."

Nunes explained what led up to Monday's scheduled tree removals.

In the past, PG&E trimmed trees eight feet below the power lines in a PG&E right of way. In the last few years, the utility has been asked by the Public Utilities Commission to do so-called directional pruning under power lines, according to Nunes. That's where a V is cut out of the top tree branches to allow the power line to pass through the tree and branches to grow to on either side of the line. That gets the clearance job done and cuts down on the amount of pruning necessary.

"It looks really, really awful," Nunes said.

According to PG&E spokesperson Jann Taber, directional pruning reduces the risk of disease and decay and is considered the best type of trimming for most trees because it retains as much of a tree's canopy as possible.

She said the method was developed by the U.S. Forest Service and is recommended by the International Society of Arboriculture Government Code of California and the American National Standards Institute.

She said PG&E must adhere to a clearance standard required by state law.

"It's a very major public safety hazard," she said. "When trees get into power lines they can very easily cause fires."

She said the Right Tree in the Right Place program could save money and lives.

To solve the aesthetic problem and the problem of continued necessary prunings, PG&E and the city of Davis came up with a plan last July to remove trees under power lines and plant more appropriate trees — medium-size shade trees — that won't grow as tall.

Under the retrofit plan, PG&E would pay to remove the trees and cover the cost of planting three 15-gallon trees for every removal.

TREE Davis offered to volun-

tarily plant the replacement trees, and had plans to place educational signs where the trees were removed.

"Basically the end product was, instead of having deformed trees you'll have nice, healthy replants," Nunes said.

"We personally feel it's disgracing to a tree to be repeatedly mispruned to the point of getting sick and dying anyway," said TREE Davis executive director Dena Kirtley. "It's kind of like saving the tree a lot of pain and misery. And the trees we were going to replace those trees with were going to provide a significant amount of shade."

She said TREE Davis was contacted by the city about the plan to replace the tall trees under power lines. The organization then agreed to get involved with plantings and public outreach.

Kirtley said PG&E appears to have made a strong effort to communicate with the public.

"I have to give PG&E a little credit," she said. "They don't have to talk to us about it."

According to Nunes, most of the trees are old ash trees. There also are a couple of sycamore trees, a hackberry, a mulberry and one valley oak.

There was no plan to cut more trees down next year. This was a pilot experiment, he said.

Tuesday afternoon, PG&E and city officials met with representatives from the neighborhood and the Historical Resources Management Commission, as well as retired arborist Phil Barker.

It was agreed that a public discussion would take place at the Davis Street Tree Commission's meeting Thursday, Jan. 18, at 5 p.m. at the Hattie Weber Museum, 445 C St.

Plans for removing the trees along Seventh Street have been discontinued until the public discussion is held. "Maybe we'll remove trees and maybe we won't," Nunes said.

Lofland said good city policies and actions come when many people are provided with information and allowed to offer input.

He asked, "Who are they to redesign our community and not consult us about it?"

While in the end, residents may agree that the plan the city had was the best one, Lofland said he continues to believe greater public notice should have been provided.

"We have achieved our objective," Lofland said. "You do not make significant changes in the Davis urban forest without the public being able to have input on a range of considerations."

Nunes said in hindsight perhaps more people should have been informed.

"It slows things down to a grind, but that's just the way it is," he said. "It's the right thing to do."

Added Kirtley, "I don't think there is a bad guy. I think that ultimately it's just a result of people and trees trying to co-habitate and there's always going to be a loser. I doubt very much it would ever be a human being. It's usually the tree."

— Reach Melanie Turner at mturner@davisenterprise.net

Our urban forest is threatened

By John Lofland

Special to The Enterprise

Responding to California Public Utilities Commission pressures and successful damage suits against it, PG&E has embarked on two new courses of action that threaten the Davis urban forest — and urban forests across the state. First, it has begun more aggressively and brutally to mutilate (to “v-cut”) street trees in order to keep them away from overhead lines.

As bad as this is, it is not as immediately threatening as a second innovation — a new kind of “final solution” — on which I want to focus here. That solution is to cut down all tall trees near overhead lines and to replace them with trees with mature heights less than the lowest lines. Call them petite trees (or perhaps pygmy, dwarf, midget or miniature trees). Ugly power lines would be left aloft permanently with no need to prune trees near them.

The first tree-cutting step in this scheme commenced Monday morning, Dec. 4, when 13 trees on Seventh and Ninth streets between B and F streets were scheduled for removal that day. These 13 are easy to identify because a yellow “X” and the white letters “USA” were (and still are) painted on the trunk of each. (The address, species and height of each are given in the accompanying box.)

Several Old North residents living near C and Seventh saw these markings on Sunday, Dec. 3, and inquired about their meaning and the significance of the “no parking” signs announcing that a “construction” zone would be in effect at that location on Dec. 4. Discovering the tree-cutting plan, residents met the tree cutters Monday morning, asked them not to start, and called city officials to the scene.

When the city superintendent of parks and open space, Bob Cordrey, arrived, the concerned residents advised him of their dismay over so few residents having been informed of this major shift in street tree management practices. They urged that, in the absence of an open and democratic process in which the implications and consequences of the plan could be thought through, the tree cutting should not go forth. Much to his credit, Cordrey instructed the crew not to proceed.

In discussions with Davis residents and city officials the next day, PG&E representatives agreed to present the utility's case for its petite tree idea at a city of Davis Street Tree Commission meeting to be held Thursday, Jan. 18, at 5 p.m. in the Hattie Weber Museum, 445 C St. I participated in the Dec. 5 meeting and I understood the PG&E people to have agreed to abide by the decision of the commission or of the City Council if there is an appeal.

Looking ahead, let me propose that the solution to the problem of tall trees near overhead lines is to put the lines underground. I have suggested this to several people and the responses are often “it would cost too much” and “PG&E would never do it.”

But these are not serious answers. First, exactly how much would it cost? How much is “too



Enterprise file photo

CUT 'EM: V-cuts in the branches of tall trees accommodate PG&E power lines, but the utility wants to replace tall trees with shorter ones.

much” and compared to what? We do not yet have such analyses and they ought to be done.

Second, what PG&E will or will not do is a function of the situation presented it. Perhaps we need to work on creating a situation in which PG&E would find undergrounding attractive. Indeed, it is of signal importance to know that PG&E already has undergrounding programs in several cities. Further, it even has had a program of undergrounding in Davis, which seems to have stalled. Why not restart it?

PG&E's scheme to replace larger with petite trees would, if fully implemented, have at least the following negative consequences.

It would be a de facto acceptance of overhead lines as a permanent and ugly feature of our older streetscapes, erasing any compelling incentive for PG&E to underground lines.

It is no accident that PG&E calls its miniaturizing program “The Right Tree in the Right Place” and has a separate organization called Safe Tree that promotes this idea. By titling the program in this way, it is claiming that once trees are midgets — “the right tree” — we have a “right place” — which is one with an overhead power line! Beautiful! One has to admire unusually clever linguistic gambits even if they are operating against you. But, as Rick Karban was dead-on in asking in his Enterprise letter of Dec. 11: “For whom is ... (a petite) tree the right tree?”

One of the reasons overhead lines are now relatively acceptable is that they are obscured a good part of the year by the leaves of tall trees near them — and even in winter by the network of limbs and branches. However brutally

Targeted trees

Each tree is painted with a yellow X and the white letters “USA”

South side of Seventh Street between B and C streets:

- 18-foot ash
- 22-foot ash
- 20-foot catalpa
- 15-foot sycamore
- 15-foot sycamore
- 11-foot valley oak
- 20-foot valley oak

South side of Seventh Street between F and the F/E alley:

- 19-foot hackberry
- 23-foot pagoda
- 18-foot mulberry

South side of Ninth Street between B and F streets:

- 40-foot mulberry
- 23-foot pagoda
- 36-foot ash
- 31-foot ash

pruned and deformed, the existing trees do in part camouflage the obtrusive lines. A forest of petite trees under the lines will make the lines ever more “in our faces.”

An urban forest dominated by petite trees cannot provide the same shading and cooling effect as one composed of full-size trees. Indeed, it is instructive to examine in shading terms the two ash trees marked for cutting at the northeast corner of B and Ninth. If those two trees are cut, the house that is 301 Ninth St. will be considerably warmer in the summer.

Judging by the current plan for Seventh and Ninth streets, PG&E's replacement program proceeds on a one-to-one formula: One tall, regular tree cut, one

petite tree to replace it. By definition, this will result in a significant net loss of shading even in the long term:

Overhead lines are in the older areas of Davis where a high canopy of trees is an historical feature of those areas per se. To dwarf the canopy on a great many streets is to compromise the historical integrity of these areas.

In addition to the negative consequences of miniaturization as an idea per se, the current effort to start with 13 trees on Seventh and Ninth has several problematic aspects.

As I look along Seventh and Ninth between B and F — where all the X-marked trees are located — I ask myself: Why these and not many others under lines along these streets? A logic of selection is not apparent. Was it random?

Of the 13, seven are in one block, the south side of Seventh between B and C. Seven represent all the trees in that block. It is a very hard hit. Why so hard? Is phasing not possible?

The proposed replacement of a limited number of petite species raises the question: Why them and not others? The strawberry tree is among those proposed as replacements. I understand this to be slow growing, particularly small, and to have a fleshy fruit that could create messes on sidewalks. The Sunset Western Garden Book calls it a “shrub-tree” and says it is appropriate for making a hedge. Why did anyone judge this to be an appropriate street tree?

Thirteen big trees would be cut and 13 miniature trees would replace them. This is a decided and permanent reduction in the square footage of the shade canopy, even aside from it being much lower to the ground.

I call on the Davis Street Tree

Commission, the City Council and the private nonprofit TREE Davis (whose volunteers would plant the new trees provided by PG&E) to disapprove PG&E's program of replacing larger with petite trees.

Let us then put our energy into getting overhead lines underground.

People interested in these matters who want to make their views known to the relevant organizations can contact:

■ Anne Brunette, city of Davis community partnership coordinator, 23 Russell Blvd., Davis; 757-5626; brunette@den.davis.ca.us.

■ Mary Burns, Program Manager, Safe Tree, 414-972-5791, maryburns@safetree.com.

■ Bob Cordrey, city of Davis Parks and Open Space superintendent, 23 Russell Blvd., Davis; 757-5626; bcordrey@den.davis.ca.us.

■ Michael Goin, vegetation management, PG&E, 1050 High St., Auburn, CA 95603; (530) 889-3806; MSF7@pge.com

■ Dena Kirtley, executive director, TREE Davis, P. O. Box 72053, Davis, CA 95617; 758-7337; treedavis@den.davis.ca.us.

■ Wendy Nelson, chair, Historical Resources Management Commission; 756-4606; wenjnel@aol.com.

■ Ken Nunes, city of Davis Senior arborist, 530 L St., Davis; 757-5626; knunes@den.davis.ca.us

■ David Robinson, chair, city of Davis Street Tree Commission; 758-9664; haruspex@coldcomfortfarms.com

— John Lofland is a UC Davis professor emeritus, a member of the Design Committee of the Davis Downtown Business Association, and the author of four books and booklets on Davis history. He can be reached at jlofland@den.davis.ca.us or 758-5258.

Let's protect trees

The following is an open letter to members of the Davis City Council:

I write to suggest that the Davis City Council undertake at least the following six actions in response to PG&E's recently escalated efforts significantly to "redesign" our city's urban forest and to "downsize" our streetscapes by (1) a new practice of "v-cut" pruning that is being done improperly and creating hazardous trees that make new demands on our city's tree crews and by (2) seeking to cut down taller trees near overhead power lines and replace them with miniature trees.

First, the city attorney should look into PG&E's liability for the damage it has inflicted on our city's trees with this new, improper pruning and, also, its

liability for the additional money the city must spend to prune the dangerous new growth on the sides of trees, which is, according to senior city arborist Ken Nunes, caused by improper v-cutting.

Second, the city attorney should assess the current validity of the city's March 24, 1959, franchise agreement with PG&E which provides that the utility shall "not alter, cut down, remove, or trim any trees ... belonging to the City ... without first obtaining a permit in writing from the City" (Ordinance 242, Section 8, clause e.)

(In addition, clause b of Section 8 provides that the utility shall "pay to the City on demand the cost of all repairs to public property made necessary by any of the operations of the Grantee under this franchise.")

Third, for the many reasons that have been publicly expressed, the council should formally oppose PG&E's plan to begin cutting down all existing trees near overhead lines and replacing them with petite trees.

Opposition to their misleadingly labeled "right tree/right place" plan does not mean that we, as a community, think no action is needed regarding the relations of trees and power lines. The problem, instead, is that their new solutions are Draconian, simple-minded, rigid and short-sighted. What we need, in their place, are solutions that are phased, complex, flexible and thought-out for the long-term.

It is critical to bear in mind that we are in this crisis not because of anything that has happened with trees in Davis or any other change in Davis. Rather, PG&E has provoked the situation we face by suddenly changing the ways it wants to treat our urban forest. The *status quo ante* of a bounded pruning program may not have been perfect, but it at least worked.

Fourth, to assist in forming an accurate picture of the extent to which Davis trees would be cut down in the PG&E petite tree plan, it would be helpful to have a map of overhead power lines in Davis. Impressionisti-

cally, such lines are seen east to west from Pole Line to Anderson roads and south and north from at least First to 14th.

If this is accurate, PG&E plans a major (and decidedly "downsized") redesign of a substantial portion of our city. But we need to know more exactly the scale and scope of the threat and the area over which PG&E seeks to substitute its chain saw neighborhood planning and design for the informed and reasoned assessments of our Planning, Historical Resources and Street Tree commissions — and the council itself.

Fifth, to signal our own seriousness about this matter, the city should restart the undergrounding project labeled C.I. P8743 (involving a route along Sixth and E streets) that it began in 1996, but that was abandoned by staff in late 1997. The irony is that the money to pay for it was there (and apparently still is), but staff gave up on it when the project got a little complicated and other city problems of the time loomed much larger.

Sixth, members of the council and the city attorney should indicate that they take these radical, new PG&E assaults on our trees seriously by attending the Street Tree Commission hearing at which PG&E has said they will make their case for their style of pruning and their petite tree program and abide by the decision of that commission.

The meeting will be Thursday, Jan. 18, at 5 p.m. in the Hattie Weber Museum, 445 C St. (As well, every civic-minded resident of Davis might want to be there and to make their views known in the period of public testimony.)

Many, many thanks your attention to, and your thoughtful deliberations about, these difficult matters.

John Lofland, Davis

Davisites show passion for trees

Residents want to ax PG&E tree plan

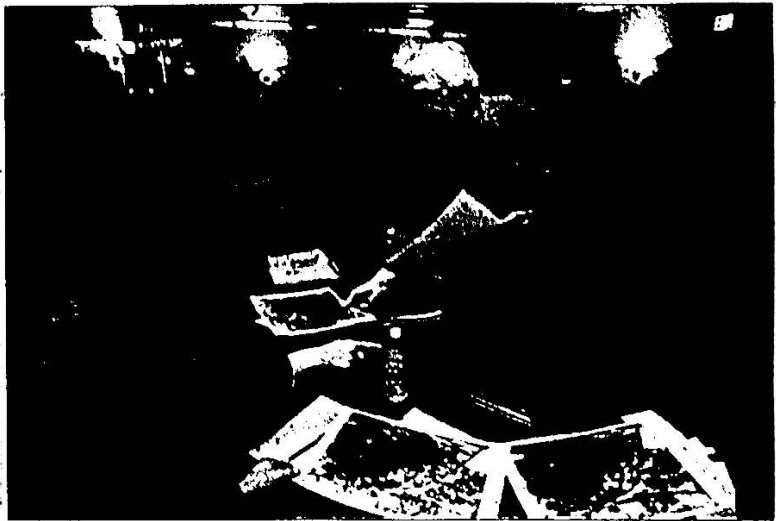
By Melanie Turner
Enterprise staff writer

More than 60 people packed a tiny meeting room in the Hattie Weber Museum, 445 C St., Thursday to speak passionately for large trees that were scheduled for removal and replacement with smaller trees in downtown neighborhoods.

Support for the trees brought a big grin to the face of staunch tree advocates like Phil Barker. "This large group is an indication of the value this community places on trees," Barker said.

He urged tree lovers to push the city for a bigger urban forest budget. Budget cuts have caused deferred maintenance. Pruning has gone from a six-year to an eight-year cycle.

See TREES, Page A8



Wayne Tilcock/Enterprise photo

TREE LOVERS: It was standing room only at Thursday night's meeting of the Davis Street Tree Commission at the Hattie Weber Museum, 445 C St. Here, UC Davis professor emeritus John Lofland, a resident of Old North Davis, distributes old photographs to commissioners showing Davis' tree canopy.

THE DAVIS ENTERPRISE

FROM PAGE ONE

FRIDAY, JANUARY 19, 2001

TREES

From Page A1

Neighbors came to share their concerns about a pilot program to replace trees under power lines with trees that won't grow as tall — a program worked out between the city and Pacific Gas & Electric Co. Downtown activist John Lofland passed out fliers encouraging his neighbors to attend the Davis Tree Commission meeting.

He called PG&E's Right Tree in the Right Place program "cynical and self-serving."

PG&E is mandated by the California Public Utilities Commission to keep trees under power lines trimmed back from the lines for safety reasons. The Right Tree in the Right Place program replaces tall trees under power lines with shorter trees that grow to the lines.

Several residents said they'd be willing to tax themselves to help maintain Davis' trees, or to help pay to move the power lines from overhead to underground.

The city of Davis maintains and manages more than 25,000 trees. In the downtown, where power lines mix with tall trees, a fire hazard is created.

For many years PG&E rounded over the tops of the trees, but in the mid-1990s directional pruning began. That's where huge cuts are made to mature trees limbs, taking out the middle third of the tree, so branches grow to the sides of the power line.

The tree still offers shade to the street below.

The trouble for the city in part lies with a new PG&E policy to not trim the small branches that grow out of those cuts. Cutting those big, mature tree limbs can create weaknesses, said parks superintendent Bob Cordrey.

According to city arborist Ken Nunes, branches that grow off the cut limbs do not have strong connections and are vulnerable to coming off in big winds. When PG&E rounded the tree tops, the small branches

would be trimmed off.

But now PG&E says it will not trim those weak branches because of budget constraints, leaving the city to see that the limbs are trimmed back, Nunes said.

"It's all about the mess that they made for four decades that they don't want to deal with," Nunes said, reached in his office this morning. "It's all over California. It's not just here."

Also, tree roots continue to send nutrients up the tree limbs, making those remaining outside limbs heavy.

Nunes said the city has just one truck dedicated to handling anything unusual, like installing an owl box or picking up after a wind storm. That truck may have to be dedicated to trimming back the branches sprouting from limbs cut by PG&E.

Objecting to directional pruning, the city met with PG&E representatives for the last few years to come up with an alternative.

With input from TREE Davis, the city worked out a program to slowly replace trees that were being directionally pruned. PG&E agreed to replace two trees for every one removed. TREE Davis representatives volunteered to do the plantings.

"It's a huge job and it costs millions and millions and millions," Cordrey said of the mandate on PG&E to trim those trees under power lines.

Nunes said while the city thought the pilot replacement program was a good one — "It was like a huge gift to the city" — a problem arose when neighborhood notification was lacking. Neighbors became alarmed when they learned that some downtown trees were coming down.

"Admittedly, that's my fault," Nunes said.

Each property owner affected by the removals — 10 trees along Seventh Street between B and G streets and two trees on Ninth Street near B — had signed a waiver to have their trees replaced.

Four representatives from PG&E attended Thursday's meeting.

"It's abundantly obvious that trees are very, very important to the community," said PG&E government relations representative Ron Sharpe. "It's not our desire to be at odds with the community. We certainly want to work with you."

He said his company would not want to remove trees if there is a consensus not to.

"If your desire is to maintain each and every tree, then that's our position as well," Sharpe said.

Several members of the community spoke in support of placing the power lines underground. They called for an economic analysis for such a proposal.

Councilwoman Sue Greenwald, council liaison to the commission, said undergrounding is done in newer neighborhoods and the city may owe it to the older neighborhoods to look at placing those wires underground as well.

Jeanine Pfeiffer said she'd be willing to help build a team of graduate students to conduct such an analysis. She said it would be less expensive than hiring a consultant.

Tom Cross, a D Street resident, said if the electric wires are due for maintenance it might make sense to put them underground now.

"I'm going to miss the rats running down the lines," joked Andy Bale, who also favored a cost-benefit analysis.

The commission voted unanimously to advise the City Council to conduct a cost-benefit analysis. There is now a moratorium on pruning those trees of concern downtown.

Dan Quickert, an arborist and downtown resident, said he believes in the concept of the right tree in the right place, but doesn't think the downtown is the right place to apply it.

— Reach Melanie Turner at mturner@davisenterprise.net

