Hazard Trees

Updated March 27, 2020

SDCI will approve the removal of a tree protected by the Seattle's Tree Protection Ordinance or Environmentally Critical Areas (ECAs) Regulations, provided you demonstrate the tree poses a significant risk of causing damage to people or property. This Tip details the process for evaluating a tree's risk and the process of completing and submitting a Hazard Tree Removal Application. See Tip 242, *Tree Protections in Seattle*, for tree protection requirements outside of these areas.

You need a tree risk assessment that is conducted by a qualified tree risk assessor. The tree risk assessor must demonstrate that the protected tree meets the criteria for removal under our ECA or Tree Protection Codes. **You are required to get approval from SDCI before you remove a protected tree**, except in emergency situations (see Clarification of Terms, page 3). To qualify for removal, a protected tree must generally meet all of these criteria:

- The tree has structural defects and/or other conditions that make it likely to fall or break

- There is a permanent structure or an area of moderate-to-high use by people, such as sidewalks or public trails that would be impacted if the tree failed

- The danger cannot be mitigated by pruning the tree or moving the structure or activity

STEPS FOR TREE ASSESSMENT

Trees with structural defects may be dangerous to people and property. If you are concerned about a tree, we recommend that you have it inspected by a qualified tree risk assessor to identify potential problems and establish an ongoing monitoring and maintenance plan to reduce the risk of property damage and injury.

The first step in a tree risk assessment is to consider "targets" that may be threatened by a tree failure. Examples of targets include permanent structures, such as houses, garages, decks and other non-movable buildings, power lines, and areas of moderate-to-high-use, such as sidewalks, trails, regularly used sections of yards, parking areas, and roads. **We will not approve the removal of protected trees if there is no target that would be impacted if the tree falls or breaks.**

You must have a qualified professional assess any tree that you think may be hazardous. A tree risk assessor will check your tree's foliage, branches, trunk, and roots, looking for signs of disease, decay, structural problems, previous damage, and environmental conditions, to determine an overall tree risk rating. **In nearly all cases you must get approval from SDCI before removing a tree protected by the Tree Protection or ECA codes.** You may only remove a protected tree without prior approval in an emergency, as defined in the Clarification of Terms section. If you remove a protected tree in an emergency situation, you must still submit all required application documents (see Submittal Requirements, Page 2). You must include a clear explanation of the risk and the emergency, once the emergency has been mitigated. We encourage you to consider leaving a portion of the tree to be removed as a wildlife snag.

Hazard Trees in ECAs and ECA Buffers

Dead and deteriorating trees often provide essential habitat for wildlife and other valuable ecological functions in ECAs. When a dead or deteriorating tree is removed, it can negatively impact wildlife that is dependent on these trees. As an alternative to tree removal in ECAs, you must consider leaving a portion of the tree intact as a wildlife snag if the threat to human life and property can be reduced to an acceptable level. In most cases, you will be required to replant with appropriate native vegetation when you remove or snag a tree in an ECA or ECA buffer. If you are converting a hazard tree to a wildlife snag, you still need to get our prior approval.

If the proposed tree removal is in a landslide-prone ECA (landslide areas and steep slope erosion hazard areas), we may require a letter from a geotechnical engineer stating that the tree removal (and any required revegetation) will not adversely affect slope stability.

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APPLICATION INSTRUCTIONS

You must complete your application online through the Seattle Services Portal, **https://cosaccela.seattle.gov/portal/**. Select Permits - Trade, Construction & Land Use on the home page. On the Select a Record Type page on the next screen, select the Hazardous Tree Removal and Vegetation Restoration Approval Request option.

For assistance with the process, please send us a question at **http://www.seattle.gov/sdci/resources/send-us-a-question** or call us at (206) 684-8467 (message line).

We will review proposals to remove trees protected by the Tree Protection or ECA codes in conjunction with a development project as part of the permit application for that project, not through the stand-alone application process described in this Tip.

Submittal Requirements

Tree Removal & Revegetation Application: The application is electronic via the Seattle Services Portal.

1. Go to: **https://cosaccela.seattle.gov/portal/**
2. Create New
3. Permits – Trade, Construction & Land Use
4. Select a Record Type: Building Permits: Hazardous Tree Removal and Vegetation Restoration Approval Request

Required Application Documents:

1. **International Society of Arboriculture Basic Tree Risk Assessment Form** (available from: **https://wwv.isa-arbor.com/education/onlineresources/basictreeriskassessmentform**)

    ■ This must be completed by a qualified professional with a minimum of three years of experience in tree evaluation and hold a current Tree Risk Assessment Qualification (TRAQ), as established by the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA).

2. **Statement of Financial Responsibility** (available from: **www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/SDCI/Forms/StmntFinancialResponsibilityAgentAuth.pdf**)

3. **Arborist's Report**

    ■ A brief report that summarizes factors contributing to the tree's risk rating. This report should include information on the overall health of the tree, analysis of potential targets, and the dimensions and structure of the tree. When necessary, the report should also include analyses of tissue samples to confirm disease or other issues.

    ■ This must be completed by a qualified professional with a minimum of three years of experience in tree evaluation and hold a current Tree Risk Assessment Qualification (TRAQ), as established by the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA).

4. **Photos**

    ■ Photos of the whole tree, defects, and potential targets

5. **Site Plan**

    ■ A legible, scaled site plan showing the following:

        ■ Site address

        ■ Site tax parcel number

        ■ Site configuration

        ■ Environmentally Critical Areas and/or buffers

        ■ Location of existing structures or other potential targets

        ■ Location of hazard tree(s)

6. **Revegetation**

    ■ If the proposed tree removal is in an environmentally critical area (ECA), your application must also include the following:

        ■ The site plan must include a revegetation plan indicating the species, spacing, size, quantity, and location of plants to be installed

        ■ Photos of the ground plane under the tree/s to be removed

        ■ If three (3) or more trees are proposed for removal within a landslide-prone or steep slope erosion hazard area, a letter from a qualified geotechnical engineer licensed by the State of Washington stating that tree removal (and any required revegetation) will not adversely affect slope stability

If you are proposing removal of a protected tree in an ECA, you should use the SDCI Tree and Vegetation Standard Mitigation Plan Form as a template for your revegetation plan. Tip 331A, *Environmentally Critical Areas: Vegetation Restoration*, provides guidance on restoration activities. You can get SDCI's standard revegetation plan from the PRC or online at **www.seattle.gov/sdci/resources**.

How Much Does It Cost?

The current hourly fee is minimum $394 when you apply. However, that rate may change, so be sure to look at the current fee subtitle which is located on our fees web page at: **www.seattle.gov/sdci/codes/codes-we-enforce-(a-z)/fees**. If it takes us more than an hour to review your application, we will charge for the additional time spent on your request.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Hazard Tree(s) in the Right-of-Way

You must get approval from the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) before pruning, altering, or removing a tree or vegetation within the public street right-of-way. This includes open and unopened street and alley rights-of-way. The SDOT Urban Forestry Arborist Office issues these permits. For further information call (206) 684-TREE (8733) and see **www.seattle.gov/transportation/forestry.htm**.

CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

Emergency—A situation in which there is an immediate danger to life and property that requires preventive action in a time frame too short to apply for and receive advanced approval. We still require you to submit a full application for removal. For ECAs, the term emergency is defined in SMC 25.09.045E. SMC 25.11.030 addresses emergency removal of trees protected by the Tree Protection Code.

Normal pruning and maintenance—Practices that are necessary to maintain existing pathways and landscaping, ensure the health of existing vegetation, or achieve limited pruning to allow windowing, reduce tree mass or redirect tree growth. When you prune trees protected by the Tree Protection or Environmentally Critical Areas codes, you must conform to ANSI A300 Pruning Standards as outlined in The American National Standard for Tree Care Operations - Tree, Shrub and Other Woody Plant Maintenance - Standard Practices. Normal pruning and maintenance, which has been lawfully maintained in the past, is allowed in ECAs and ECA buffers without SDCI approval. SDCI does not consider tree topping or removing established vegetation to be normal and routine maintenance.

Pruning—The pruning of a tree through crown thinning, crown cleaning, windowing or crown raising, but not including topping of trees or any other trimming likely to kill or significantly damage the tree.

Qualified professional—A qualified professional shall have a minimum of three years of experience in tree evaluation and hold a current Tree Risk Assessment Qualification (TRAQ), as established by the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA).

Topping—The cutting back of limbs to stubs within the tree's crown, to such a degree as to remove the normal canopy and disfigure the tree; or the cutting back of limbs or branches to lateral branches that are less than one-half (1/2) of the diameter of the limb or branch that is cut.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

- Seattle Department of Transportation **www.seattle.gov/transportation/forestry.htm**

- Basic Tree Risk Assessment Form and Instructions **https://www.isa-arbor.com/education/onlineresources/basictreeriskassessmentform**

- Trees are Good - Managing Hazards and Risk **www.treesaregood.com/treeowner/treehazards.aspx**

- Tip 242, *Tree Protection Regulations in Seattle* **http://web6.seattle.gov/dpd/cams/CamDetail.aspx?cn=242**

- Tip 331, *Environmentally Critical Areas—Tree and Vegetation Overview* **www.seattle.gov/DPD/Publications/CAM/cam331.pdf**

- Tip 331A, *Environmentally Critical Areas: Vegetation Restoration* **www.seattle.gov/DPD/Publications/CAM/cam331a.pdf**

- Director's Rule 16-2008, *Designation of Exceptional Trees* **www.seattle.gov/dpd/codes/dr/DR2008-16x.pdf**

- Environmentally Critical Areas Standard Mitigation Plan **www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/SDCI/Forms/ECAStandardMitigationPlan.pdf**

Access to Information

Links to electronic versions of SDCI **Tips, Director's Rules**, and **Forms** are available on the "Tools & Resources" page of our website at **www.seattle.gov/sdci**. Paper copies of these documents are available from our Public Resource Center, located on the 20th floor of Seattle Municipal Tower at 700 Fifth Ave. in downtown Seattle, (206) 684-8467 (message line).

LEGAL DISCLAIMER: *This Tip should not be used as a substitute for codes and regulations. The applicant is responsible for compliance with all code and rule requirements, whether or not described in this Tip.*

TREE ASSESSMENT FLOWCHART

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        ┌─────────────────────────────────┐
        │ Target Zone: Is there a target   │
        │ that could be impacted by the    │
        │ tree?                            │
        └─────────────────────────────────┘
          │                    │
        ┌────┐              ┌─────┐
        │ NO │              │ YES │
        └────┘              └─────┘
          │                    │
          │              ┌──────────────┐
          │              │ Can the target│
          │              │ be moved?     │
          │              └──────────────┘
          │                │          │
          ▼            ┌─────┐     ┌────┐
     ┌─────────┐       │ YES │     │ NO │
     │   No    │◄──────└─────┘     └────┘
     │ Hazard  │                      │
     └─────────┘              ┌──────────────┐
                              │ Is the whole  │
                              │ tree defective?│
                              └──────────────┘
                                │          │
                            ┌─────┐     ┌────┐
                            │ YES │     │ NO │
                            └─────┘     └────┘
                              │            │
                              │     ┌──────────────┐
                              │     │ Can remedial  │
                              │     │ actions solve │
                              │     │ the problem?  │
                              │     └──────────────┘
                              │       │          │
                              │    ┌────┐     ┌─────┐
                              │    │ NO │     │ YES │
                              │    └────┘     └─────┘
                              ▼      ▼           ▼
                     ┌──────────────────┐  ┌──────────────┐
                     │ Convert tree to   │  │ Prune tree or │
                     │ wildlife snag or  │  │ Undertake     │
                     │ remove tree.      │  │ remedial action│
                     └──────────────────┘  └──────────────┘
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