Valley Oak Tree Editorial

(August 1, 2011)

Written By David Pendergraft, City Urban Forester and Jim Bean, City Parks & Urban Forestry Manager

Question: Why does it seem so many large Valley Oak Trees are falling down (failing) throughout the City this year?

Opinions for failure of the older heritage Valley Oaks vary; too dry of a year, too wet of a year, or the abundance of acorns that year. All of these reasons are valid, but the reality is older heritage Valley Oaks fail unexpectedly and property damage is a distinct possibility in the warmer months of the year. The prudent thing for private property owners to do is have their Valley Oak tree inspected.

Question: How many mature Valley Oak trees exist within the City limits?

There are approximately 1,600 mature valley oaks in the City right-of-way. There are an estimated 2,000 trees on private property within the city limits.

Question: Why does the City have a Valley Oak Ordinance?

Prior to urbanization, valley oaks heavily covered 400 square miles of the Central Valley. Visalia's City Council first adopted a valley oak ordinance in 1971 in an effort to help preserve valley oaks from urbanization. The ordinance is still in effect with the same intentions to beautify, preserve, and enhance the quality of life and the unique identity of Visalia. Over the years, the Ordinance has been amended several times.

Question: Can a private property owner prune or remove their own private Valley Oak Tree?

This is the most misunderstood part of the ordinance by Visalia citizens. A private property owner may hire a licensed tree trimming contractor to prune their tree. Prior to the trimming, the property owner (or a tree service) must file an "Intent to Prune" form notifying the City of their intention to trim their valley oak tree.

To remove a valley oak tree, a property owner must submit an "Application for Removal" form along with a $25.00 non-refundable fee to the Urban Forestry Division. Once received a City Arborist will inspect the tree within 7-10 business days and either grant or deny a permit. In the oak tree ordinance, there is a provision that allows for the removal of an oak tree of any size if the tree substantially interferes with the economic enjoyment of the property and there is no viable alternative to removal. If granted, the property owner must hire a licensed tree trimming contractor to remove the tree. These procedures are in place to prevent an unlicensed and inexperienced individual from removing a tree and possibly damaging private property or injuring themselves or other workers.

Question: What happens if somebody illegally trims or removes a Valley Oak tree?

Any violation of the ordinance constitutes a misdemeanor and is punishable by conviction and/or a fine. It could also include the City's Costs and attorney's fees in prosecuting the matter in addition to doubling the in-lieu mitigation amount indicated in the Oak Tree Mitigation Policy. The majority of violations reported to the City are reported by watch dog citizens or adjacent neighbors.

Question: Will the City Arborist provide me with an evaluation of my private Valley Oak tree?

The City's position is private property owners should contact a private Certified Arborist to evaluate your privately owned tree. Many are listed and identified on the internet or in the phone book. The City does not provide a tree inspection service for private Valley Oak trees.

Question: Who (or what company) should I use to prune or remove my Valley Oak Tree?

A licensed and insured tree trimming contractor that uses ANSI A300 Pruning Standards.

Question: My neighbor has a Valley Oak tree (or any other tree) that hangs over my property line and I'm afraid it may cause damage to my property (either through root damage or a falling limb). What can I do about it?

This is a civil matter between two private property owners. The best course of action is to talk to your neighbor, inform them of your concerns. Another tactic is to inform your property insurance carrier of your concerns, many times they can assist. There are court cases that have determined an adjacent property owner cannot damage or remove a neighbors tree that hangs over onto their property without their permission. The City Urban Forestry Division does not resolve civil cases between private property owners.

Question: How does the City take care of their own Valley Oak Trees?

The City utilizes a private contractor to trim valley oak trees on a 3-4 year cycle depending on the size and type of tree. All City park trees are trimmed by a City tree crew. In 2010, the City trimmed over 10,000 City owned trees, including nearly 1,900 Valley Oak trees.

Question: Is the City taking steps to reforest or plant new Valley Oak trees that have been lost over the years from urbanization?

Yes. The City of Visalia has been awarded a Tree City USA award for 29 years. To qualify for this award you must plant a certain number of trees each year. The majority of these trees are Valley Oaks. Over the last 5 years, working with the non-profit Urban Tree Foundation, the City has planted nearly 5,000 new trees on City owned property.