

Activists battle to preserve views — of trees

By Alan Lopez
STAFF WRITER

EL CERRITO — Created by the City Council in the 1970s, the city's tree ordinance has been a thorn in the side of the city for the last few years.

A new group has formed recently with the goal, among other things, of repealing the ordinance, which says that bay views from homes in the El Cerrito hills and trees are equally important to the livability of the city.

In cases where there is a dispute between residents with a view and trees, the city will step in to decide if a tree should be removed.

Battles between residents with blocked views and those who want to keep the offending tree have been played out in front of the city's tree commission, which is charged with settling the disputes.

The new group arose when Ann Thrupp noticed the same people attending meetings and lobbying the city on environmental issues.

Several of them began meeting informally last year to discuss city issues. Soon after, the group Friends of El Cerrito Trees was born.

The group wants to protect healthy trees, Thrupp says, and let people know how valuable trees are. There are 10 to 12 active members with 30 to 40 people on the group's mailing list.

"A lot of us are just very interested in improving the environmental and aesthetic conditions in El Cerrito, to make it a more beautiful place," said Thrupp.

Thrupp said the group believes that law weighs heavily on the side of homes with views, and has collected more than 100 signatures from residents who want the ordinance repealed. They agree, she says, that the ordinance does not protect the interests of the community as a whole.

"It says that the bay view is more valuable than trees," said Thrupp. "It gives the rights to the property owners to say their neighborhoods should cut down the trees."

Jennifer Lowe, the tree commission chairwoman, said the ordinance is flawed because it asks the commission to choose between trees, something meant for the community, and views, meant just for the homeowner.

"I personally think that it's a flawed ordinance," Lowe said,

FRIENDS OF EL CERRITO TREES

To contact the Friends of El Cerrito Trees, call Ann Thrupp at 510-965-1110 or e-mail athrupp@igc.org.

though she added in the last few years, the tree commission has only asked to trim branches and never cut down a healthy tree.

However, Thrupp said, "Our belief is that this particular ordinance and (tree) commission does not serve a very useful function ... we feel that those kind of problems, if they arise, should be handled through a professional mediation service and the city should not get involved."

But not everyone agrees. Glenn and Donna Davis wrote in the June 15 issue of the El Cerrito Journal that they wanted to keep the ordinance in place.

"I enjoy my view while working with my uphill neighbors to assure that my trees do not impede their views," they wrote.

City Attorney Janet Coleson said the tree ordinance is being studied to see if it needs to be updated, and the decision will ultimately rest with the City Council.

In addition to the tree ordinance, Friends of El Cerrito Trees intends to work with the city to raise public awareness about trees through educational and outreach efforts; help protect and conserve trees in public and private property in the city and discourage the cutting of healthy trees; encourage and assist in the maintenance and planting of trees and other vegetation; and support broader environmental conservation and stewardship efforts in the city.

Group members say that trees have many economic, ecological, health and aesthetic benefits and want to work with the city staff on planting, care, planning and conservation and maintenance.

"We want to take a positive approach to this," Thrupp said. "That's a very important point. We want to work with the city and encourage maintenance and conservation of healthy trees. We want to make El Cerrito an environmentally friendly and beautiful green place to live."



STEVE MASLAN/KA/STAFF

MEMBERS OF Friends of El Cerrito Trees, clockwise from bottom right, Linda Blum, Rosemary Loubal, Ross Tobia, Evelyn Kiresen, Victoria Hughes, Deborah DiFruscia and Ann Thrupp pose before a eucalyptus tree at Huber Park.