

Citizens group proposes an alternative tree ordinance for Atlanta

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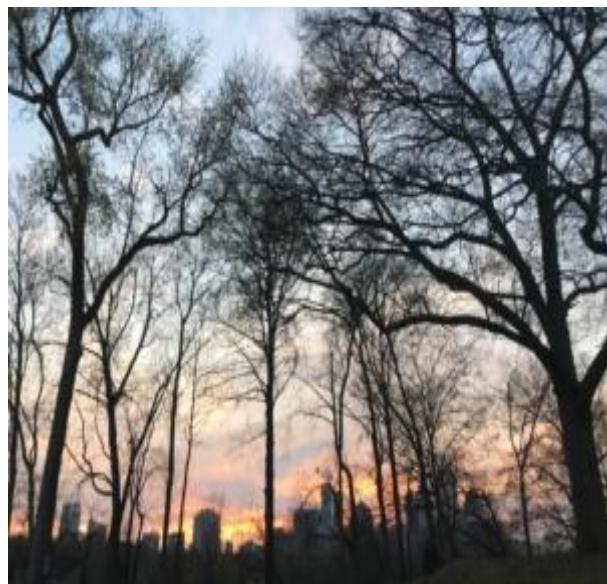


Atlanta may get a new and improved tree ordinance after all.

The Atlanta City Council held a Tree Ordinance Work Session on June 25 to discuss a proposed draft ordinance prepared by consultants and released March 20.

But it was an alternative draft tree ordinance presented by a citizens group that stole the show.

Chet Tisdale, a retired environmental attorney who serves on the City of Atlanta's Tree Conservation Commission, helped convene 22 citizens – professional arborists, developers, an ecologist, attorneys, members of watershed protection organizations, members of tree protection groups among others – who worked the alternative draft tree ordinance.



Trees at Piedmont Park (Photo by Kelly Jordan)

The citizens version addresses many of the criticisms the public had of the draft tree ordinance proposed by the consultants, with some people questioning whether it had more loopholes than the tree ordinance Atlanta has had in place for the past 20 years.

Tisdale said the citizens alternative is still a work in progress, and he welcomed the public to propose ways to make it “a tree protection ordinance that the city of Atlanta deserves.”

Ecologist Kathryn Kolb and arborist Tierson Boutte presented the citizens alternative during the online work session. To read an executive summary, click [here](#).

“The citizens tree ordinance puts trees first,” Boutte said.

Members of the Atlanta City Council and representatives from the planning department appeared receptive to the suggestions presented by the citizens group.

"Our thinking has evolved since the draft came out in March," said Tim Keane, Atlanta's planning commissioner. "Our existing tree ordinance is quite old, and there's lots of dissatisfaction with it from all parties. It doesn't do a great job of protecting trees. The process is convoluted and unpredictable."



Trees at Piedmont Park (Photo by Kelly Jordan)

Keane added that a new tree ordinance should align the fees so that it would be more difficult to cut down trees.

Both versions of the revised tree ordinance recommend putting the protection of trees at the beginning of the building permit process.

The city would work with developers and landowners to help them design their projects to adapt to the site rather than have them alter the site to adapt to their designs, according to Andrew Walter, the city's project manager for a new tree ordinance.

By putting trees at the beginning of the process, citizens could appeal plans to cut down trees before developers had made significant investments in site design and working drawings. Currently, appeals are at the end of the process when developers already have drawn up their plans making it more costly to make changes to their projects.

Also, the current ordinance encourages the unfortunate practice of developers just including the punitive cost of cutting down trees as part of their projects. In other words, the ordinance does not serve as enough of a deterrent to cutting down trees.



Figure 1A white oak reaches from the land toward the sky on Atlanta's Arbor Avenue.
(Photo by Kathryn Kolb)

The proposed citizens ordinance would use a matrix to prioritize the protection of higher value trees — especially those that contribute to Atlanta as a city in a forest. Also, developers who illegally cut down trees would face more stringent penalties.

"I'm excited we're having this discussion today," Councilman J.P. Matzigkeit said, adding that he hoped the city would incorporate parts of the citizens ordinance in the final draft.

Councilmember Michael Julian Bond, a native Atlantan, said he would "err on the side of preserving trees" because Atlanta is known for being a city in a forest.

"I love trees, and I want to see an ordinance that fully protects our canopy," Bond said during the online work session. "I'm excited about the dialogue (with the citizens group), and I hope you'll continue to have discussions."

Bond also expressed concern about how the effort to draft a new tree ordinance has been delayed, partly because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

"We want to have an ordinance adopted by Council by the end of the year," Keane said. "The goal is to get you an ordinance by the end of September so it can be adopted by the end of this calendar year."

Everyone who spoke said it was important to make sure that any new tree ordinance was equitable across the city and did not contribute to making Atlanta less affordable.

The work session also included two hours and six minutes of 82 voicemails from members of the public – many expressing displeasure with the consultant's draft tree ordinance and support of the citizens alternative.

As Westmoreland said at during the work session: "We will get this across the finish line in a way that we can really be proud of as a city."

Source: <https://saportareport.com/citizens-group-proposes-an-alternative-tree-ordinance-for-atlanta/>