

CITY AUDITOR LAURA DOUD


# Exploring the Feasibility of a Tree Management Plan Takes Root After City Audit

by JASON RUIZ  on JULY 06 2016 10:58 in NEWS Share

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Long Beach will be exploring how to better assess the health of its trees after the Long Beach City Council directed the city's public works department to study how a the city can create a tree life-cycle management plan.

The vote comes just one week after an audit revealed that because a mixture of mismanagement and the drought, over a quarter of the city's 26,000 park trees were found to be dead or in dire condition. Over half of the city's trees are considered to be in fair or worse condition, a problem that doesn't appear to have any let up in sight, with the state adopting permanent water use restrictions.

A handful of council members, led by Fifth District Councilwoman Stacy Mungo, called for public works to look into the feasibility of creating the management plan, one aimed at instituting proactive measures to better track the long-term health of a valuable city asset. According to a recent analysis, the trees in Long Beach are estimated to be worth about \$112 million, a figure that City Auditor Laura Doud warned will decline as more and more trees slip in to failing states.

Mungo noted the financial importance, as well as the ecological value, of having healthy trees in the city and keeping those trees alive and well. Her proposal called for top-down and bottom-up methods of checking tree health, with the potential of using technological measures like satellite imaging to track tree health from above, and using more traditional methods like field assessments to track tree health from the ground.

"As our trees get older, they have a life-cycle, just like people do, just like pets do," Mungo said. "We need to be aware of our trees and their health."

Doud characterized the city's approach to tree maintenance as being in "crisis mode," deploying a reactive approach to maintenance after trees' health have dramatically fallen off. The question of how to correct that style of approach was a point of contention between the auditor's office and the newly appointed Director of Parks, Recreation and Marine Marie Knight, who rejected nearly half of Doud's recommendations, including the formation of a five-year tree maintenance plan.

Knight attributed the level of service that led to the tree and park maintenance deficiencies to a lack of resources, stating that the recommendations needed to be weighed, along with "funding and service challenges." Mungo's request for a study acknowledged that any plan will most likely result in an increase in spending but noted ongoing accrued costs for not taking action.

"The approval of the requested action is anticipated to have a fiscal impact due to the cost of the initial study and any management plan that is implemented," Mungo's memo to Mayor Robert Garcia and the council read. "However, without such a plan, the City is likely to continue incurring extraordinary financial liabilities due to uprooted sidewalks, disrupted utilities, property damage and environmental degradation."

