



City of Durham
TOWN HALL SUMMARY
May 6, 2025

Location: Juanita Pohl Center, 6-8 PM

Councilors present: Council President Leslie Gifford, Councilors Gary Paul and David Streicher

Councilors absent: Mayor Josh Drake, Councilor Sean Lee

Staff present: City Administrator Jordan Parente and Administrative Assistant Kait Garlick, City Attorney Emily Guimont

Purpose of Meeting:

To update residents on the status of the City's tree code revision process, clarify procedures and responsibilities, and gather public feedback on tree-related policy issues.

Meeting Opening By:

Emily Guimont, City of Durham Outside Legal Counsel:

- Explained the need to separate tree regulations into *municipal code* (for non-development tree removals) and *development code* (for trees affected by new construction).
- Highlighted conflicting, outdated language between existing code sections that need legal and procedural clarity.
- Provided a summary of the two-tiered review process being considered for tree removal permits:
 - **Tier 1:** Administrative review (layperson/city staff can approve obvious cases like visibly leaning or uprooted trees).
 - **Tier 2:** Arborist review for more complex cases.
- Emphasized the City's goal to balance tree protection with public safety and property rights.

Jordan Parente, City Administrator:

- Outlined the background of the tree code revision, beginning with hazardous tree concerns raised by residents in early 2023.
 - A Tree Committee was formed with citizen and Planning Commission representation, meeting weekly over the course of multiple months.
 - The Committee produced a full draft of a new ordinance, though the original intent was for recommendations only.
 - A draft code was compiled by staff and legal counsel based on Council feedback and legal standards. The Tree Committee's draft was considered by the Council but was not reviewed by the City Attorney, upsetting some residents.
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Concerns and Feedback from the Public:

Lack of Trust and Transparency in Process:

- Many residents expressed frustration that the Tree Committee's recommendations were largely disregarded or significantly rewritten.
- Concerns were raised about communication gaps between city staff, council, legal, the tree committee, and the public.

Cost and Burden of Tree Removal:

- Residents described significant costs for arborist reports (\$1,000+) and tree removals (\$10,000+ in some cases).
- Calls were made for a streamlined and affordable process for homeowners, especially for hazardous or diseased trees.

Safety Risks from Trees:

- Multiple residents shared personal stories of trees falling on homes, often with no visible signs of disease or hazard prior.
- Emphasized the need for policy to prioritize *life safety* over canopy preservation.
- Suggested criteria include trees that are isolated, leaning, have shallow roots, or previously part of now-removed groves.

Unequal Application of Rules:

- Some attendees noted that developers have been allowed to clear-cut areas (e.g., Durham Heights), while residents face tight restrictions.
- Several called for consistent standards between city-led, developer-led, and homeowner actions.

Need for Historical Context and Tree Tracking:

- Suggestions included mapping tree fall incidents and tracking canopy trends to inform future policy.
- Residents requested the City post Tree Committee documents and revisions online for transparency.

Desire for Broader Permit Categories:

- Some advocated for broader removal criteria, including sunlight access or landscaping changes.
- Others emphasized stricter standards to avoid misuse of hazardous classifications.

Equity Between City and Residents:

- Residents asked that the city be held to the same standards when removing trees on public land as residents are on private property.

Council & Legal Responses:

- Legal counsel and the City Administrator acknowledged the breakdown in process but stated the current goal is to create a legally sound, enforceable ordinance, using community feedback that City Council may incorporate going forward.
- Council members emphasized they will take the feedback provided and work to draft an ordinance that will better reflect the desires of the community. They appreciated residents showing up to provide input.
- Legal counsel confirmed that all final policy decisions will lie with the elected Council, not the Tree Committee or City staff.

Next Steps:

- **Next Work Session:** Tentatively scheduled for **May 20, 2025** at City Hall. Meeting will be open to the public (in-person & via Zoom).
- **Ordinance Timeline:** Goal is to present a first reading of the revised *municipal tree code* at the **May 27, 2025** City Council meeting.
- **Public Input Opportunities:** Residents are encouraged to submit written feedback to the City Administrator at "cityofdurham@comcast.net" for inclusion in future meetings.
- **Transparency Commitments:** The City committed to making the Tree Committee's original recommendations publicly accessible on the City website.

Approved:

JOSHUA DRAKE, MAYOR

Attest:

JORDAN PARENTE, CITY ADMINISTRATOR/RECORDER