



CITY OF SANTA BARBARA
PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION REPORT

AGENDA DATE: August 26, 2015

TO: Parks and Recreation Commission

FROM: Administration Division, Project Management
Parks and Recreation Department

SUBJECT: A History of Trees in Five of Santa Barbara's Oldest Parks

RECOMMENDATION: That the Commission receive a presentation on the research to develop a history of the trees in East and West Alameda Plazas, Upper and Lower Orpet Parks, Plaza del Mar, Plaza Vera Cruz, and Mission Historical Park.

DISCUSSION:

Introduction

Although Santa Barbara was once a fairly treeless landscape, today's urban forest is a complex mix of street trees, trees within developed parks, native forests along creeks and within open spaces, and trees in landscaped areas of public facilities and on private property. The extent and diversity of the City's current urban forest is primarily the result of efforts of past horticulturists, including Dr. Doremus, Dr. Francesco Francheschi, and E.O. Orpet. Many of their planting efforts are concentrated in some of the City's oldest parks and plazas. As such, histories of the trees in East and West Alameda Plazas, Upper and Lower Orpet Parks, Plaza del Mar, Plaza Vera Cruz, and Mission Historical Park were compiled to better understand the intent of tree planting and vision of the parks. The histories include a timeline of tree plantings and the identification of original plantings that still stand today. This information will inform the development of tree replacement plans and supports several key objectives in the Urban Forest Management Plan, including:

- Developing a Park Tree Master Plan;
- Assessing and developing age and species criteria for City parks;
- Maintaining existing species diversity and investigate methods for increasing desirable species that are rare;
- Maintaining stands of large trees in open spaces and community and developed parks;

- Protecting and enhancing trees in historically significant parks such as through increased tree maintenance and tree planting programs; and,
- Maintaining the history, design, cultural integrity and functional use of developed parks, as feasible.

Methods

The libraries at the Santa Barbara Historical Society, the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, and the University of California, Santa Barbara were visited to obtain historical information about the parks in question.

Hard copy files located at the Parks and Recreation Department were also referenced to create a clearer picture of the history of the respective parks. Of the resources examined, the Park Commission Meeting Minutes revealed information about major tree removals. Aerial images of the City through the years were found in the Public Works archives. These images were compared to determine how canopy coverage has changed over time.

The City's tree inventory database was consulted to create a list of current species in the parks. The City's tree inventory database was also utilized to get a better understanding of the size composition of the parks current tree population. The *Trees of Santa Barbara* books, held in the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden Library, were used to create historical tree inventories. Versions from the 1940, 1948, 1976, and 2007 were referenced. The tree inventories through time were cross-referenced to determine the change in species density and diversity in the parks over the years.

Site visits were conducted at each of the parks in the company of the City Arborist. The site visits were taken to confirm the present tree composition of the parks and verify original plantings.

Although some planting and removal dates and park tree inventories were collected through the aforementioned resources, large gaps in the historical records of the parks exist. While the site visits allowed for an estimation of the number of original plantings that exist today, the total number of trees originally planted in the parks is unknown. A complete record of tree removals during the past century is unattainable as well.

Findings

General themes between the assessed parks became apparent upon completion of the park histories. East and West Alameda Plazas and Upper and Lower Orpet Parks have an extensive horticultural heritage and were intended to be worldly arboretums displaying a wide range of exotic tree species. Both of these parks have a large number of species that are either unique to the parks (six tree species in East and

West Alameda Plazas and 16 tree species in Upper and Lower Orpet Parks) or rarely found in Santa Barbara's urban forest (appearing five or less times). This means the loss of a particular species within the parks is likely to have a significant impact on species diversity within Santa Barbara's urban forest as a whole.

Along with a strong horticultural heritage, East and West Alameda Plazas have always been a valuable location for public and private events alike. Similarly, the historical significance of the remaining assessed parks lies in public usage rather than being worldly arboretums. For example, Plaza del Mar was once a bustling gathering place for picnics, concerts, and political events while the large grassy area and rose garden at Mission Historical Park attracted large private events and dog owners. Current usage of Mission Historical Park remains consistent with the past but Plaza del Mar is no longer the public gathering place it once was. Maintaining and/or improving tree diversity in East and West Alameda Plazas and Upper and Lower Orpet Parks could continue to be a priority. If the historical use remains valid today, maintaining and/or improving the usage base of the other three parks should be the focus of future park management. Below includes a brief summary of the information found for each of the assessed parks.

East and West Alameda Plazas

East and West Alameda Plazas have been open spaces since the first city map was drawn in 1853. Proper maintenance of this area did not occur until 1902 when the first Park Commission was created and a Parks Superintendent appointed. Dr. Doremus, the first Parks Superintendent, intended the Plazas to be an arboretum showcasing tree species from around the world. He achieved this goal by planting a variety of tree species including the Northern Rata (*Metrosideros robusta*), Montezuma Bald Cypress (*Taxodium mucronatum*), Fern Pine (*Podocarpus gracilior*), Brisbane Box tree (*Lophostemon confertus*), and Black Acacia tree (*Acacia melanoxylon*). His horticultural legacy was continued throughout the decades with numerous exotic tree species being introduced. By the 1970's, East and West Alameda Plazas boasted a total of 112 unique tree varieties. This number has declined to 82 unique tree varieties in the Plazas today, many of which are found only in the Alameda Plazas or occur infrequently in Santa Barbara's urban forest.¹ Understanding the frequency of tree varieties in East and West Alameda Plazas in relation to their occurrence elsewhere in Santa Barbara will help to maintain species diversity not only inside the Plazas but also in the larger context of Santa Barbara's urban forest.

Although the total number of original trees planted by Dr. Doremus in East and West Alameda Plazas is unknown, there are at most 40 trees currently in the Plazas that are representative of Dr. Doremus' original plantings. These trees are outlined in "A History

¹ A current tree inventory list from Arbor Access was compared to inventories from the early 1970's.

of Trees in East and West Alameda Plaza” and represent approximately 15% of the total tree population. All of these trees appear to be healthy, but it is predicted most of them will reach the end of their life in the next 10-30 years. A large number of palm species exist in the Plazas, representing 42% of the trees in West Alameda Plaza and 54% of the trees in East Alameda Plaza. This is important since many of the younger trees in the Plazas are palms as well, meaning that as older specimens die-off, it is likely that the palm trees will begin to dominate the skyline. The full research for the Alameda Plazas is attached to this report.

Upper and Lower Orpet Park

Acquired in 1919 with help from the Riviera Company, a resident group dedicated to purchasing land for a City park, Hillside Park was later renamed Orpet Park because of the extensive impact E.O Orpet had on the horticultural heritage of Santa Barbara's urban forest. Mr. Orpet planted many of the tree species he brought from abroad in Orpet Park in the 1920's including the Australian Juniper-Myrtle (*Agonis juniperina*), Scrub Yellow-Wood (*Acronychia baueri*), and Cape Olive tree (*Elaeodendron capense*). There are currently 236 trees in Orpet Park representing 93 species. Similar to East and West Alameda Plazas, many of the tree species (16) are unique to Orpet Park or are found infrequently in Santa Barbara's urban forest (five or less times). This means the loss of a particular species within Orpet Park has the potential of greatly impacting the species diversity of Santa Barbara's urban forest as a whole. Unlike East and West Alameda Plazas, a large number of palm trees were never introduced to Orpet Park. Instead, Mr. Orpet's theme of planting exotic tree species continued through the decades. Although the total number of trees originally planted by Mr. Orpet is unknown, at most 31 trees currently in Upper and Lower Orpet Parks represent specimens planted by Mr. Orpet in the 1920's. These trees are outlined in “A History of Trees in Upper and Lower Orpet Park” and represent 13% of the total tree population in the parks today. Many of the original plantings that currently exist are healthy and can live between 100 to 300 years, so it is likely they will continue to grow in a healthy manner for decades to come.

Plaza del Mar

Plaza del Mar, acquired by the City in 1900, has always been an open space. Even before the City took it over, it was a designated public garden and a popular spot for bathing, strolling, and enjoying concerts. As Parks Superintendent, Dr. Doremus had a difficult time introducing trees to the area since it was an alkali swamp. Although Dr. Doremus suggested pumping the water out of the area using a Dutch-inspired windmill, the swamp was ultimately filled in to grade level. Eventually, Dr. Doremus successfully introduced Montezuma Bald Cypress trees (*Taxodium mucronatum*) to the Plaza. Although Dr. Doremus was likely responsible for the introduction of other tree species to Plaza del Mar, the historical importance of the Plaza is not tied solely to its

horticultural legacy. The first Los Baños del Mar Bathhouse (later to be rebuilt in its current location across from the Plaza), built in 1901, was described as a “proud and fantastic spectacle...with no equal on the Pacific Coast” and helped to attract visitors to the Plaza.² It has also been described as a “classic community gathering place for concerts and political speeches.”³ There are currently 75 trees in Plaza del Mar representing 19 tree species, two of which are found infrequently in Santa Barbara's urban forest. Although the total number of trees originally planted in Plaza del Mar by Dr. Doremus is not known, at most 32 trees in the Plaza are old enough to be original plantings, which represent 42% of all the trees in the Plaza today. While this is a significant proportion, 19 Canary Island Date Palms are included in this number and were all planted at the same time. Although possibly representing original plantings, if these palms were not planted by Dr. Doremus in the early 1900's, the number of original plantings would be affected dramatically. The possible original plantings appear healthy and are likely to live for the next 50 to 100 years. Future management of Plaza del Mar could include working to expand the Plaza's usage base to better align it with its historical use as a community gathering place.

Plaza Vera Cruz

Similar to East and West Alameda Plazas, Plaza Vera Cruz appears as a designated public square on the first city map in 1853 and was officially made a park in 1855. The historic area of Plaza Vera Cruz is larger than it is today and parts of the park were often leased to outside parties to be used as recreation areas. There is no historic comprehensive tree inventory for Plaza Vera Cruz, but it is known that numerous shade trees were planted in the Plaza in 1905. There are currently 41 trees in Plaza Vera Cruz representing 17 tree species. At most, 14 of these trees are old enough to be original plantings, which represent approximately 25% of the trees in the Plaza. While this is a large percentage, none of the trees species in Plaza Vera Cruz are unique to the Plaza or are found infrequently within Santa Barbara's urban forest (five or less times). These trees appear healthy and are likely to live for the next 50 to 100 years. Plaza Vera Cruz is a potential site for increasing and/or fortifying species diversity in Santa Barbara's urban forest, if that is made a priority.

Mission Historical Park

While Mission Historical Park is not one of the City's original parks, it holds importance because of the historical site it once was. Ruins located on its premise include a historic filter house, grist mill, reservoir, and aqueduct. This portion of the park was acquired by the City in 1948. The other areas of the park, acquired by the City in 1939, contain a large grassy area and the A.C. Postel Rose Garden. Information concerning

² NewsPress. “A Tiny Park of Shady Character”, 1994.

³ NewsPress. “A Tiny Park of Shady Character”, 1994.

historical plantings is limited since the introduction of exotic tree species was never a priority in Mission Historical Park. There are currently 189 trees in the Park, and 75% of them are represented by just three tree species: Coast Live Oak-78 (*Quercus agrifolia*), California Pepper tree-36 (*Schinus molle*), and Olive tree-33 (*Olea europaea*). Located near Mission Creek, the surrounding foliage is representative of a native riparian habitat. Shifting the areas of Mission Historical Park that contain a high density of trees towards a diverse stand of native trees would have the effect of blending in with the surrounding environment. Although current drought conditions make lawns an inefficient use of water, this open space needs to remain available to City residents as a gathering area offering open vistas of downtown Santa Barbara, the harbor, and Santa Cruz Island in the distance.

Next Steps

The trees in the assessed parks reflect the City's diverse horticultural heritage and create an arboretum that links other cultures, times, and places. Park tree histories create a clearer picture of the current species and age composition and highlight the historic vision and development of the selected parks. Ultimately, the information will help inform future management of the parks, including the development of planting proposals. These planting proposals will provide a baseline as park uses change or as parks become candidates for development and landscaping changes. It is also recommended that education and outreach plans be created to inform the public about park and tree history. Considering nominating older specimens for historical specimen designation is also an option.

ATTACHMENT: A History of Trees in East and West Alameda Plaza

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