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Supervisor Mike Antonovich
Hall of Administration
500 West Temple Street
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Re: Transplanting Oak Trees

Dear Supervisor Antonovich,

Since 1991 I have monitored 87 transplanted coast live oaks in the City of Calabasas, all of which were moved to accommodate either residential development or the widening of the Valley Circle Interchange. The attached article summarizes the results of this quantitative study. Sadly, the survival rate of the trees over the long term is not high. Over the 10 year study, fewer than 5% of the trees had recovered their root systems, and the optimistic survival rate is at most 40%, with 10-20% being more realistic. Despite high levels of care, in some cases even exceeding industry standards, the trees struggle to regain the lost root mass and often succumb to root rots or other pathogens before they can become re-established.

It is important to note that transplanting a tree is not the same as "saving" the tree. Trees have not evolved the ability to move. Their survival strategy is keyed to staying in one place, using stored energy reserves in the woody roots and trunk to tide them over during periods of stress resulting from fires and droughts. If you want to save a tree, the only way to do it is to leave it in place and work around it. This can be done successfully with creative use of available building technology.

The Lake Sherwood transplants are consistently used as the example of successful oak tree transplantation. To date, there has never been any published study to prove the claim of 90% survival. It would be wonderful to see the data that shows the conditions of the trees before transplanting, and follows their condition over a 10 year time frame. Until that data is provided, it appears that the survival rate claim cannot be verified. It is interesting that trees in our study that were carefully followed and received similar levels of follow up maintenance did not show anywhere near the same rates of survival.

A case in point is the unique large oak that was moved 60 feet to accommodate the expansion of the Valley Circle Interchange in 1993. That tree was moved at a cost to taxpayers of $125,000. It is now standing dead, very expensive firewood.

Several other issues need to be considered when deciding to transplant an oak. First, the tree has lost over 95% of its stabilizing roots, making it a hazard tree subject to failure. Placement of the tree in landscape needs to avoid any possible targets, like roads, picnic areas, or trails, where the collapse of the tree could cause any damage. The liability involved with transplanted trees is quite high.

Second, who will be responsible for the long term maintenance of the tree? The cost involved in providing weekly care to transplanted trees is significant and should be required to extend over at least a 20 year period, assuming you can get the tree to stay alive for that time. Requiring an escrow account to fund that maintenance should be a requirement of the transplanting.

Third, the method used to transplant the tree is critical to providing the optimal chance for success. It is common practice to cut all 4 sides for the root ball simultaneously, and then trim back the canopy. A more reasonable approach used in many other areas is to cut 1 side at a time, allowing the tree a chance to recover some fine root mass over a period of 3-4 months, and then proceeding to cut another. The whole process would thus take a year. Retaining the canopy and allowing the tree to die back as needed appears to help the trees survive the insult of massive root loss.

Finally, even if the decision is made that this particular tree is important enough to spend $250,000 for the initial transplanting, and perhaps another $240,000 to cover the cost of maintenance over a 20 year time frame, what have you really gained? The tree no longer serves the same function or role in the landscape. Instead of being a self sustaining native tree that provides immeasurable ecological and aesthetic benefits, as well as measurable economic benefits in stormwater runoff reduction, temperature modification, air pollution reduction, and carbon sequestration, you are now left with a high care, high risk tree that will require substantial investment just to keep it alive.

Oak trees are a keystone species, the hub of the wheel for literally thousands of other species that need the oaks in order to survive. They also are a symbol of the California landscape, a visual reminder of constancy and endurance. Valley oaks are one of the most endangered of the 18 species of oaks found in California, and one of the longest lived. 400-600 years is not unusual. The San Fernando Valley is the southernmost extent of their range.

Given the tremendous contribution of these trees, it seems only reasonable that instead of cutting them down, or moving them from place to place, we respect their integral contribution to the landscape and work hard to preserve them. The legacy of a tree such as the Pico Oak is truly invaluable.

I encourage you to rethink the decision to transplant the oak, and instead creatively consider ways to truly save the tree by working around it. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this issue.

Sincerely,

Rosi Dagit