

Much ado about just doing a job

Activists learn when a tree's not a tree and a shrub can hide a crime

BY TOM CARTER

A SPECIAL meeting held for angry neighborhood activists to call Rec & Park to task for removing trees in Boeddeker Park turned into a basic primer on why, when and how the department fixes routine problems with greenery.

The peaceful outcome was thanks to the activists — many of whom didn't bother to show up.

Even so, the session left a bad taste for the Rec & Park employee setting the record straight. He was "frustrated" that his routine work was questioned.

The strange interlude began with an outburst over trees at the Friends of Boeddeker meeting in the park clubhouse on Aug. 14.

Before committee Chair Betty Traynor could tackle the agenda, agitated resident David Baker insisted that the dozen people attending consider a burning nonagenda item — Rec & Park's recent removal of some trees and shrubs in Boeddeker. The brick planter along the sidewalk through the park was bare dirt now and Baker was furious. Traynor gave him the floor.

"Six trees and shrubs were removed and it took us all by surprise," said Baker, a longtime champion of Tenderloin trees. "It's outrageous. Full-grown, mature trees. And they didn't confer with us."

Traynor said it was a shame Steve Cismowski, Rec & Park's neighborhood manager, was on vacation, or he could explain. Traynor had routinely invited his supervisor, Justin Lyman, but he wasn't able to attend either. Lyman did send an email, which Traynor read aloud. It said the changes were to make the park a "visually safe and esthetically pleasing, sustainable landscape" and "fragrant, flowering shrubs" had been ordered for the planter.

Many on hand, including Traynor, were disappointed they hadn't been notified about the plan beforehand.

"No advance notice is disrespectful," said David Villa-Lobos, head of the Community Leadership Alliance.

"The trees gave shade so people could sit on

benches in comfort," said resident John Nulty. "Now you've made it not as pleasant. We need oxygen. Foliage is gone and it'll take years to get it back."

Park Director Al Wimberly said he was "shocked" to have no advance notice before workers swept in to clear the planter, but still, he was the only one at the meeting who favored the move.

"I like to know what's going on in my park," Wimberly said, "but it was good judgment in my opinion: 90% of the people in that corner are drug dealers and they hide dope from police in those trees."

"If it was up to police they'd tear down every tree in the neighborhood," Baker shot back.

The discussion veered to the \$3 million-plus renovation the park is in line for in three years. (See the August Extra.) Maybe to have made changes now was a waste of money, it was speculated.

"It's an extreme solution," said Elaine Goduti. "What brought it on?"

No one knew.

"The timing wasn't good," said Traynor.

"The right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing," said Nulty.

"Poor judgment," said Baker.

"There's been no input," said Villa-Lobos. "We should go to the Rec & Park Commission and ask for censure."

To hash it out, Traynor said, she'd arrange a meeting with Cismowski and notify everyone. She moved on to the next agenda item.

The meeting with Cismowski, announced widely in emails, was held Sept. 5 at the Antonia Manor at 10 a.m. Present were Traynor, Cismowski, resident Ed Evans and Villa-Lobos, who arranged the meeting. Tenderloin Capt. Gary Jimenez arrived later. Baker, Nulty and other critics didn't show.

The vegetation was removed at Boeddeker in two parts, Cismowski said, after it was discovered that a cherry tree and shrubs — thought to be innocuous — had been causing water leaks inside the community building for two years. Invasive roots had eaten through the waterproofing and were pry-

ing off the west wall, he said. So that vegetation was torn out to be replanted with greenery that grows low enough that the park's director can look out of the community building and see into the playground where children gather.

Also, the irrigation system in the walkway's 4-foot-wide planter didn't work and the planter was overcome by bay bushes, he said. Their "notorious root systems, destined for trouble after five to 10 years," had jammed against the planter's walls, endangering it.

"Weren't there five or six trees?" Villa-Lobos asked.

There were a couple of Pittosporiums in the planter giving "a modicum of shade" that technically were nontrees, Cismowski said. Rec & Park defines a tree as having a minimum 6-inch diameter at chest height. Furthermore, only when a "nonhazardous tree" is to be removed is the work posted and a contact telephone number listed for inquiries.

The new walkway vegetation will be colorful and grow low enough that police can see inside the park, he said.

Evans said Rec & Park should have communicated with citizens.

"We're hired to do a job because of our expertise in these matters," Cismowski said, "and it's quite frustrating when the community doubts our judgment — that gets challenging. And to rush to the Park & Rec Commission would be precipitous."

Cismowski then led the group outside and to the park a block away to examine the work being done. The group stopped briefly to gaze at the barren planter that would receive its plants the next week.

"They don't have the advantage now of hiding behind that," Jimenez said. "Thank you."

Villa-Lobos apologized for the others not showing up and quickly complimented Cismowski on his "good work" that had been questioned.

"That undergrowth used to have rats in it, too," said Traynor.

"The new growth won't jeopardize the integrity of the walls," Cismowski said. ■

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