

Community Forest Advisory Board

City of San Diego



December 7, 2019

Councilmember Jennifer Campbell, Environment Committee Chair
Councilmembers Barbara Bry, Monica Montgomery, and Scott
Sherman, Environment Committee Members

SUBJECT: *Proposed Environment Advisory Board*

The Community Forest Advisory Board (CFAB) urges the City to reconsider absorbing CFAB into the proposed Environment Advisory Board. Rather, the CFAB should continue to operate as a free-standing board. We ask the City to accelerate the appointment of members to CFAB, in order to sustain its effective work. If absorption of CFAB is inevitable, while less than ideal, we recommend that urban forestry be recognized as a standing committee of the new board.

Scope of Proposed Environment Advisory Board

We acknowledge the reasons for board consolidation, including the issues identified in the July 2017 audit report, engagement of additional environmental and sustainable expertise, board efficiencies, and holistic approach to environmental science and climate change. Realignment is a reasonable, periodic policy process, and regrettably the board consolidation proposal was adopted at a single Environment Committee meeting on July 18, 2019. We encourage the Environment Committee to sponsor a process that considers all reasons for consolidation and engages stakeholders.

The scope of the proposed advisory board is unmanageably broad. A more deliberative process could lead to establishing a new board that is aligned with the Sustainability Department and implementation of the Climate Action Plan. It could lead to expanding the Park and Recreation Board to encompass urban nature, not just natural resources in parks. It could add a board focused on air, water and other environmental issues tied to economic activities and regulations. A process could assess the effectiveness of consolidating functions into the newly consolidated Mobility Board.

Consideration of Urban Forestry Perspectives

CFAB members were dismayed that CFAB was not consulted, informed, or invited to the July 18 meeting. This shows a disregard for process, involvement, and the contributions of time, expertise, and advice of local professionals and community members over many years.

Many opportunities and challenges were outlined at the April 18 meeting of the Environment Committee that focused on urban forestry, yet subsequently your focus has been on this restructuring rather than the urgent tree health, program management, and staffing issues.

The proposal for an environment advisory board includes no long-term provision for urban forestry and arborist representation. If CFAB is dissolved, consideration needs to be made to establish a standing committee for urban forestry.

Also, the two-year term is ill-advised. No group can function effectively with such high turnover, plus there are long timeframes for recruiting and approving board members. CFAB has three-year terms with renewal for another three years, and that has brought new board members, sustained interest and initiative for programs, and depth for program oversight and advocacy.

Importance of Community Forestry Advice

The Community Forest Advisory Board has served for 20 years now, with clear duties and actions that have supported and strengthened the City's actions for trees, residents and visitors. CFAB has provided incredible service to the City, especially in the seven years when there was no professional urban forestry staff (2008 to 2015). CFAB members wrote grant proposals that funded the five-year urban forestry plan, tree inventories, and tree planting; assisted with writing the five-year plan; advocated for staffing (and now there are four positions, including the tree warden position that was transferred in 2019 from development services); successfully opposed the Mayor's elimination of tree maintenance funding for the past three years; and provided hundreds of hours of community education, tree planting and care, and advocacy for climate action.

Most other cities have tree boards, that serve as effective elements of municipal urban forestry "best management practices," applying expertise from local professionals and community members in managing incredibly complex urban forestry activities. San Diego established this community forestry board in 1999 for the same good reasons and set strong and clear duties that the Board is committed to carry out.

Without this official voice, it is likely that resources to grow and sustain the City's urban trees will shrink, tree health and the tree canopy will decline, and implementation of the Climate Action Plan will be further constrained.

Board Effectiveness

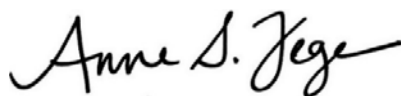
There have been ongoing challenges with appointments, confusion about quorum, changes in meeting location and time, and proposed budget reductions. As the City's audit report on advisory boards (2017) emphasized the vacancies and appointments process, it may be more constructive to improve those aspects of board management, rather than eliminating a Board because it has vacancies and expired terms. (There are five vacancies on CFAB, and the terms of all members ended on December 31, 2018 or will end on December 31, 2019.) Applications have been submitted online but have not been checked for security or forwarded to the Council for approval.

Until the Council approves any combination of boards, there remain significant urban forestry issues that CFAB is obligated (by municipal code) to advise the Mayor and Council about. The unfilled positions are greatly limiting our effectiveness (as the City's 2017 audit report indicated for many boards), and we ask that these applicants be considered and forwarded for appointment.

The effectiveness of advisory boards rests on the receptiveness of the Mayor, Council and City staff to the advice that we are chartered to offer. We remain optimistic about how our collective efforts can strengthen urban forest management, for trees to essential public health, safety, and environmental services to residents, businesses, and visitors.

This letter was approved by the Board at the November 13, 2019 meeting. Please feel free to contact me with questions and further information.

Sincerely,



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cc: J. Beane, District 2 staff; M. Elliott, City Attorney; B. Widener, City Forester; J. Day, Boards and Commissions; CFAB