

June 11, 2024

Whittier Mayor & City Council
13230 Penn St.
Whittier, CA. 90602

Dear Mayor and City Council Members:

Before Whittier embarks upon a \$20+ million project with the goal of bringing more customers to businesses in a revitalized Uptown area, there is an obvious expectation that research was conducted to provide evidence that the project is likely to achieve that objective. Was survey research, or ANY research, conducted? Where is the data that makes you believe that dropping a cookie cutter, Orange Co. style modern design into the center of historical Whittier will be successful? Are you just hoping for such an outcome? Uptown Whittier is unique and distinctive because of our historical buildings and our exceptional canopy of trees. Ask anyone walking along Greenleaf AV and they will tell you that.¹ Removing ALL of the mature, shady trees at once will drastically alter the look and feel of those three blocks of Greenleaf AV, but it will NOT change our GPS coordinates.

Through multiple letters and public comments² over the past few months, and recent, individual phone calls with many of you, I have reiterated that everyone supports improving Uptown, and that achieving that goal and maintaining the tree canopy are not mutually exclusive. Agreeing to a compromise solution that can be accepted by all stakeholders, both businesses and residents, is vital to quell the public uprising and begin the healing process for our community.

Several of you have told me that you are awaiting City Manager Brian Saeki presenting a range of options for discussion at the June 18th special City Council meeting/study session that can bring a resolution to this contentious issue. YOU are the decision makers, elected by Whittier citizens to represent us. YOU need to insist that the City Manager include for consideration at least one option to Keep the Canopy.

As previously stated, if the most significant option the City Manager brings forward merely proposes larger replacement trees (i.e. up to 72" boxes), but still requires removing ALL of the existing trees in the three blocks that constitute the heart of Uptown, that would be unacceptable to residents. Neither would an option that retains a few ficus trees in clusters. The petition, now with 3,840 signatures and growing, clearly advocates a compromise phase-in approach. The petition wording is against eliminating "ALL of Uptown's ficus trees at once, rather than the previously discussed Streetscape Plan to gradually replace them." That

¹ Evidenced by last week's extensive media coverage in the L.A. Times, KTLA(ch5) and ABC(ch7) reporting what they heard from numerous people they spoke with on Greenleaf Av.

² Letters to you dated Feb. 5, Feb. 20, Feb. 27, Mar. 26, Apr. 30, May 7, and May 28, and public comments on Jan. 23, Feb. 13, Feb. 20, Feb. 27, Mar 12, March 26, Apr. 23, Apr. 30, May 14 and May 28 incorporated by reference.

reasonable approach complies with Whittier's current ordinances/laws including the Uptown Specific Plan (USP) and the Tree Manual containing the Tree Index.

At your City Council meeting on May 14th, the City Manager admitted that he was unaware that our City has a Tree Index³. The Tree Index denotes the type of city-owned trees planted on every street in Whittier in the strip between the sidewalk and the curb, AND the designated type of replacement trees. That Tree Index is part of the Tree Manual that was codified into law following the City Council's unanimous adoption of Ordinance No. 3045 on January 12, 2016, including aye votes by Cathy Warner, Fernando Dutra and Joe Vinatieri. As pointed out to you in my letter of May 28th, the City's Tree Index designates replacement trees for the three blocks of Greenleaf Ave in the Promenade Plan as laurel fig/ficus trees. Because Whittier's Tree Manual including this Tree Index was codified in 2016, and is specific about tree replacement species, it would supersede any conflicting tree succession options described in the USP adopted in 2008 and amendments in 2014.

To repeat what I wrote to you on May 28th, the large size and scope of the Greenleaf Promenade Plan adopted on 12/12/23, including the design of the street slope, curbs and gutters - and ADA requirements - are described as the structural reasons why the ficus tree canopy cannot be retained, even precluding phasing-in every other tree as called for in the USP⁴. The design of the adopted Plan is definitely large in size and scope as it removes EVERYTHING – all trees, sidewalks, curbs, and gutters, and uses pavers instead of concrete for sidewalks. But our current sidewalks already meet legally-required ADA compliance standards⁵. A significant number of ficus trees could be saved and maintained by pouring new concrete surrounding uplifting roots instead of using pavers in the areas around those trees. Sidewalks could be designed to extend into the street without sacrificing all of the ficus trees. By contrast, the size and scope of the Greenleaf Promenade Plan is described as small, minor adjustments to the USP in the state-required Environmental Impact Report (EIR) Amendment Negative Declaration adopted on 12/12/23 by the City Council in conjunction with the Greenleaf Promenade Plan. Changes are assessed as so small and insignificant that the report asserts there will be NO IMPACT to the environment in any of the multiple environmental categories required by State law to be reported for this size project.

The City Council can fix this crisis and salvage this project at your June 18th meeting by adopting a reasonable compromise that phases in tree removal and replacement as described in existing city ordinances. It will require some re-design, but that can be done. Construction documents for bids have not been finalized and chain saws have not come out yet. Surely you are not so naïve to believe that if you proceed with the Plan to chop down all of these trees, that thousands of Whittier tree advocates will simply “go away.” **We will NOT.**

³ Yet the 72-page EIR Negative Declaration document approved on 12/12/23 (referenced in paragraph above) cites Ordinance No. 3045 encompassing Whittier's Tree Manual and Tree Index.

⁴ Statement made by City Manager Brian Saeki at the April 30th City Council meeting/study session, disregarding tree succession and phasing as described in the City's USP ordinance.

⁵ADA compliance: minimum sidewalk width of 36" (3 ft.) If sidewalks are less than 60" (5 ft.) wide, passing spaces must be constructed every 200 ft.

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Council Meeting: _____
Agenda Item No: _____

The overriding question remains: WHY is the City Council so obstinate and dismissive of the outraged voices of thousands of City residents? You are our elected representatives, yet you appear to be ignoring the vast majority of Whittier residents despite having a viable compromise. Your Council has the opportunity to create a legacy of Uptown revitalization that everyone can be proud of. Working together as a community let's get this right.

All the best,

(original signed)

Conny B. McCormack
28-year resident of Whittier
L.A. County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk (Ret.)

cc: Brian Saeki, City Manager
Rigo Garcia, City Clerk