

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Do these trees really need to be cut down?

Just after Christmas, Austin residents in the Eastwoods, Hancock and Hyde Park neighborhoods north of the University of Texas campus woke up to what looked like a bounty of unexpected presents.

They came wrapped in seasonally festive reddish and green ribbons, and they were distributed widely in the front and back yards of private homes, along the sidewalks of apartment complexes and playgrounds, down the lengths of drive-through alleys and in generous numbers along the perimeter of the century-old Hancock Golf Course.

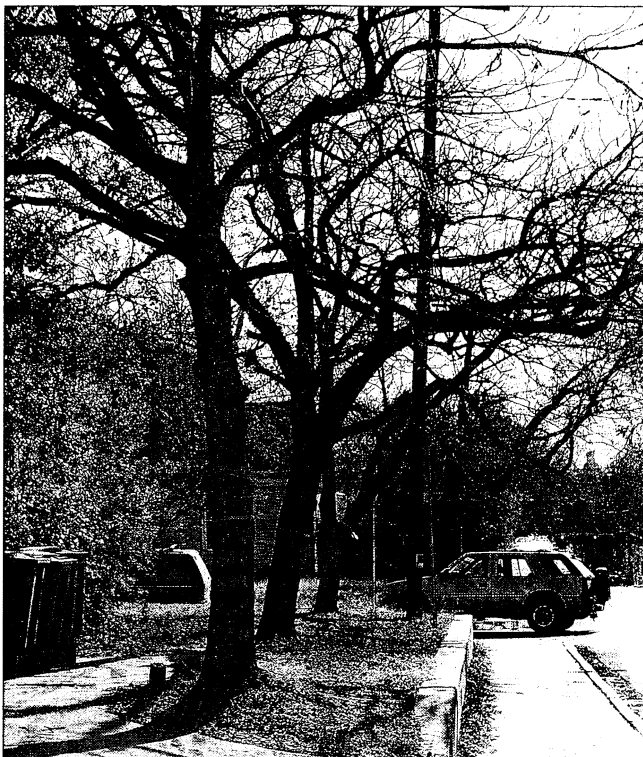
The wrappings were placed around our very own trees — old, full and healthy trees. These were not late deliveries from Santa and his elves. These were markers from Austin Energy and its tree-cutting helpers from Asplundh Tree Expert Co. Countless trees were marked for complete removal (pink tags) or radical trimming (green tags).

The first alarm came from Beth Gross, who reported the tagging of trees for extreme pruning and removal along East 43rd Street between Red River Street and Interstate 35. On one lot, five old trees were slated for removal. A neighbor's 60-foot pecan tree with an 18.5-inch trunk diameter was tagged for removal. Trees planted by grandfathers and old deceased friends were marked to be cut down.

The sole tree in our own front yard, a beautiful 15-year-old red oak, which has grown up with our son — they came of climbing age together — is now tagged for removal, as are two large pecans in our back yard and two in our neighbor's yard. Keep in mind that we are talking about small city lots, each with a few carefully tended trees. Many properties stand to lose 30 percent to 50 percent or more of their protective canopy against sun, heat and noise.

More reports came in of tagging trees all along 41st Street from Guadalupe Street to Duval Street, virtually every tree on Duval for several blocks north of 45th Street, and seven large trees in a row along the west side of Hancock Golf Course. Residents spoke of an "Asplundhering" of our neighborhoods that would resemble Sherman's march through Georgia.

How could this be happening in our Austin, a city that prides itself on its parks? Why was the city improving sidewalks along the very routes that would soon become unwalkable from



These trees on Duval Street north of 45th Street are slated to be removed by Austin Energy — a decision that has angered neighborhood residents.

Carolyn Palaima
SPECIAL TO THE
AMERICAN-STATESMAN

May to October without the shade of the trees tagged for removal?

The Hyde Park, Hancock and Eastwoods neighborhood associations formed a task force that has already met with City Council Member Lee Leffingwell and his staff representative, Andy Morman, and with Matt Curtis, assistant to Mayor Will Wynn. Austin Energy was represented by Ray Henning, Austin Energy's utility/forestry superintendent, Judy Fowler and Michelle McAfee.

The task force discovered that individual homeowners raised questions in 2001 and 2003. But individuals do not stand a chance. They can meet with representatives of Austin Energy's tree-cutting companies, but the tree companies always have the final say, and they say that cost dictates their Shermanesque methods.

Henning explained that he looks only at the potential effect of any single tree on the power lines, not at the number of trees removed or pruned in any area. There is no pruning for aesthetics. Trees are removed if an 11- to 13-foot clearance from the power lines cannot be achieved.

In a city made distinctive and livable by its tree cover, general city-wide policies need to be crafted. Everyone is for safe and secure power lines, but there are alternatives to large-scale tree removal. Henning could not provide any statistics on electrical outages from fallen tree limbs — we do not know of

one in our neighborhood in the last 11 years. Nor has the city considered the loss of tax revenues from the decline in property appraisals such drastic tree removal will cause.

The neighborhood task force has called for studies of the environmental impact of Austin's trees on heat, noise pollution and wildlife. As Austin comes denser, trees become more vital to our vitality. The city also needs to explain why past citizen complaints have not been heeded, and why residents still are given little or no information about tree cutting.

The good news is that the city has declared a temporary moratorium on Austin Energy's tree-cutting, at least in the area north of the university. The bad news is that the issue is as unresolved now as it has been for years. The best news would be if the City Council calls a longer moratorium until the city of Austin, not Austin Energy, can devise a comprehensive plan to save trees that factors in environmental and quality-of-life issues.

Austin's famed Treaty Oak, attacked with poison in 1989, was the last survivor of the 14 Council Oaks revered by the Comanche and Tonkawa Indians. Development destroyed the other 13. Let's hope our mayor, City Council, Austin Energy and concerned citizens can work together to ensure that 21st-century Austin leaves a better legacy.

Palaima teaches classics in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Texas at Austin.