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.

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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.

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 Tonkowa 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.