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Preserving Our Tree Canopy: “No, We Don’t Let Developers Cut Down Trees and not Replant Them”

Recently, a long-time citizen told me they loved what we were doing in the City, but they wished we wouldn’t “let developers just cut down trees and not replant them.” After taking a little time to explain that the statement wasn’t accurate, I realized that we’ve done a poor job of communicating about the City’s tree ordinances.

To provide clarification, let’s talk about our tree canopy. It’s a bit technical but bear with me.

Tree canopy is a percentage measurement that describes the layers of leaves and limbs that shelter the ground when viewed from above. The canopy is typically thought of as the top of the trees that help shelter and shade habitat below and moderate ground surface temperatures. Many suburban areas have a canopy between 30% and 60%, with the City of Peachtree Corners being higher than average in the upper 40s. It is commonly necessary for existing trees to be removed from the buildable areas of new developments, but in these cases, the tree canopy is preserved and often supplemented in other areas of the site.

The city’s tree replacement requirements typically result in more and better-quality trees being replanted than originally existed on the site. The land used to construct many large and established neighborhoods in the city, such as Neely Farm, Amberfield, and Peachtree Station, was originally clear-cut during the construction phase of the project only to be supplemented at strategic locations with the replanted hardwoods that have matured into what you see today.

As these newly planted trees mature, they often provide an increase in canopy compared to what was existing prior to development. As a result, the tree canopy within the city will continue to increase when assessed over time. This can be seen when looking at aerial photos over the years showing older developments with mature trees and comparing them to the pre-development tree coverage.

The City’s tree ordinance governs how developers must treat our tree canopy. Here’s a basic overview of the process:

- The intent of the tree ordinance is to ensure that a maximum number of trees remain or are replaced in a development.
- There is a tree density standard that defines the specific number and size of trees that must be preserved or replanted to maintain the tree canopy.
- The city emphasizes preservation so trees that are not removed count more than a planted tree of the same size.
- Developers must submit a tree preservation and replacement plan prepared by an accredited tree professional that meets the tree density standard.

- The City has the authority to stop work on a site and issue hefty fines where tree removal or damage occurs in violation of the approved tree preservation or replacement plan.
- The City has a “Tree Bank” for developers to pay into if tree density requirements are not met due to a documented hardship (like not enough space on the site).
- The funds in the Tree Bank are used by the city to plant trees on city-owned properties and rights of way.

It's understandable that some citizens have the impression that lots of trees are being cut down and are not being replaced. Development takes time, and it takes even longer for trees to grow. However, here are some facts on trees:

- Since 2019, there have been over 5,000 trees planted on the development sites that received a land disturbance permit (LDP).
- That's an average of ~1,000 trees being planted per year through LDPs. Add in the previous seven years PTC has been incorporated and that extrapolates to ~12,000 trees planted.
- There are an additional 1,100 trees that have been approved for planting through an LDP but have not yet gone into the ground. They will be planted or installed when current projects progress to the final landscape phase.
- Waterside alone is required to replant ~1,400 trees, about half of which have already been planted. Waterside's canopy calculation is ultimately required to be 60%, meaning that when the planted trees reach maturity, 60% of an aerial view of Waterside will be tree canopy.

Peachtree Corners is proud to be a Tree City USA community. The city first received this designation in 2016 and has been recertified by an independent evaluation team from the Arbor Day Foundation every year since. With this designation, the City is recognized for having a strong tree ordinance, staff dedicated to tree protection, and funds dedicated specifically to the planting of trees.

As a Tree City USA community, Peachtree Corners believes greatly in the importance of trees. As we move into fall and winter, and the leaves have fallen, we can sometimes see issues with our trees that we could not see when they were in full bloom. During the fall and winter months, the City receives an increase in calls ranging from fallen trees, dead and/or hazardous trees, or tree debris that has fallen due to rain, wind, or ice. It is for this reason that the City has codes that address all these scenarios.

City staff are also glad to meet with you on your property to provide guidance on trees. Our tree canopy is very important to us, and I hope this clarifies your understanding of how the City handles trees and development.