

Greensboro City Council debates the value of trees

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GREENSBORO — What's a tree worth?

Chop one down and you can sell the wood for fine furniture, for paper products, for firewood.

Plant a line of them, let them grow for a half-century, and you have the shimmering tunnels of green that shade the city's most beautiful streets.

And do without them in a new development entirely, and you can provide housing more affordably.

With the City Council debating a requirement that new homes come with one tree each, the value of a tree isn't just a philosophical question, and the answer could determine whether the future Greensboro becomes a little bit greener.

Landscape architect Randal Romie can rattle off a list of benefits that stem from trees. Looks. Shade. Even stemming air pollution.

Beyond that, they just appeal to something fundamental in the human psyche.

"We're part of nature, is basically what it comes down to," Romie said. "When we connect with nature, we feel better. You almost experience healing. It's like home."

Romie, who helped work on the proposed ordinance, said trees help define the image of the city, particularly older neighborhoods where many trees were retained and have grown since.

"All we're doing is getting back to what Greensboro is famous for — neighborhoods like Fisher Park, Lindley Park, where there are trees in every yard," he said. "That's what made Greensboro green, is the way they developed those subdivisions in the '40s and '50s."

But it's not always that simple, some argue.

Some see trees as beautiful — in someone else's yard. In their own, they see a looming maintenance issue, a 50-foot battering ram waiting to fall on something.

"Very often people will want the trees to be taken down," said City Councilwoman Sandra Anderson Groat, who has developed housing aimed at lower-income buyers. "They're worried about the possibility of maintenance."

Beyond that, keeping or adding trees adds to the cost of creating housing, she said.

When aiming for an affordable niche, every decision that affects the bottom line is critical.

"If you're trying to build a really quality home at the lowest price possible, it's tough," Groat said. "Is it better for a family not to have trees on their lot or not to be able to buy a home at all?"

Increasingly, though, providing trees is becoming customary.

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Wade Journey , who builds homes aimed at a lower price point, said one tree is planted along with every new home. In part, it's a business decision — having the trees, which cost about \$100 each, helps the homes sell.

“I think the value that it adds is more than the cost,” he said.

In fact, some studies suggest that homes with trees sell for higher prices than those without.

“I haven't met many people who don't like trees,” Journey said.

The difference in atmosphere between neighborhoods with trees and those without can be stark.

Some streets suggest wooded cathedrals, with limbs that form vaulted ceilings above the road and sidewalks below. Near houses or apartments, the effect can be like being in an outdoor living room.

Others resemble a scene from the Great Plains, with long sight lines and an open feel. The scattered trees sometimes look like they're years away from withstanding a fierce storm, let alone casting any shade.

The requirement, which is part of an extensive rewrite of the city's land development rules, has gone through some twists and turns.

A committee Romie served on had recommended a requirement that offered a range of options that would have, on balance, meant more than one tree. But that got tossed in favor of the one-tree-per-house proposal.

“It's better than what we have, because what we have is nothing ...” he said. “But it's not much.”

On the other hand, Groat prefers no requirement. If there has to be one, it should exempt less expensive homes, she said.

Still, it is possible to mix trees and affordable housing.

Becky Kates , who lives in the Glenwood neighborhood, mentions a Habitat for Humanity project that left large trees around three new homes.

“It really made a huge difference in integrating the homes into the neighborhood,” she said. “If you drove down the street, you wouldn't have any idea they were built a year and a half ago.”

Her own home is surrounded by mature trees — oak, hickory, crape myrtle — casting shade and beautifying the area. They even help cut down on power bills by keeping the house cooler.

In fact, those trees were one of the reasons Kates picked an older neighborhood to live in.

“It doesn't make any sense to me to chop all the trees down and then just plant new trees,” she said. “You don't have to wait 30 years for these little trees that the developer planted in the front yard to actually grow to make an impact.”

Kates has a simple answer for the appeal of having trees around.

“It's just prettier.”

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