Cities, like families, continue discussions over generations in ways that are unique to each generation and time. One major such discussion in Santa Monica today is about our City trees. Trees help create the iconic image of our city. Trees provide shade and beauty. Trees protect our environment.

We’re talking about them again, in a formal way, because the downtown Ficus trees, now more than 40 years old, were tagged for removal and replacement as part of a 2007 iteration of a City beautification and healthy trees plan. The 2nd and 4th St. Ficus trees were planted in the 1960’s under the advocacy of Jacqueline Girion, Head of the City Beautification Committee, and Clo Hoover, a respected Mayor and a highly successful businesswoman.

Continuing the tradition of protecting our City trees, a group of Santa Monica residents got together and started TreeSavers, an ad hoc committee originally formed to oppose the demolition of the 2nd and 4th St. Ficus trees. In fact, Jerry Rubin, one of the co-founders of TreeSavers, chained himself to a Ficus to prevent it being taken down. That was part of a demonstration that mobilized public opinion. Eventually TreeSavers petitioned the Council to form a City Tree Commission.

This being Santa Monica, the Council took the challenge to heart and at the April 7, 2009 City Council meeting they voted that the first City Urban Forest Task Force be formed to provide oversight and public participation in decision making about Santa Monica’s Urban Forest. The Staff recommended “that City Council establish an urban forest master plan task force to advise staff on the development of a long-range urban forest master plan, review specific urban forest issues related to the master plan, and serve in an advisory capacity to City Council.” Councilmember Bloom moved the staff report recommendation. There was a brief discussion about membership criteria, followed by a unanimous aye vote of the Council Members present. TreeSavers supports the Task Force idea. They see it as ‘a good start’ on the way to a formal Tree Commission.

The Task Force will formulate its goals. Optimally they will include: giving the public a voice; protecting and enhancing our existing urban forest; helping to craft a master plan that creates beautiful urban design; designing each street for environmental sustainability; and making sure that, while we’re on our way to a new urban forest master plan, we make good decisions today, decisions that reflect our values.

For the Task Force to do the job well it will need, among its members and on its staff, people who have an appreciation of trees, a knowledge of water and air quality and the role of trees in protecting and cleaning the environment, and a knowledge of a sustainable plant palette. If that weren’t enough, our City Urban Forest is a major contributor to the
quality of urban design in the City. Oh, and trees provide shade and are beautiful.

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