

ITEM 3.2. AUSGRID TREE PRUNING**FILE NO: S051491****MINUTE BY THE LORD MAYOR**To Council:

The City's urban canopy helps make our city liveable for our residents and workers. Street trees benefit the community's health, remove pollutants from the air, create shade in the hot summer months and enhance general wellbeing. In densely populated areas, trees can also provide privacy.

There are currently around 81,000 trees in the City of Sydney area. Our last canopy measurement in 2013 found that the Local Government Area (LGA) has a 17.1 per cent canopy cover. This is up from just over 15 per cent in 2008.

Over the past 11 years, more than 11,431 street trees have been planted throughout the local area as part of our commitment in Sustainable Sydney 2030 to increase the local area's green canopy by 50 per cent to 23.5 per cent in total.

Street trees need to be pruned occasionally to maintain the security of the overhead electricity wires. However, I share the concerns of residents about the disgraceful way in which Ausgrid's contractors mutilate trees.

The methods breach the Australian Standard for the Pruning of Amenity Trees. Of particular concern is:

- the 'pruning' is excessive and unnecessary and, far from being based on a risk management approach, it is simply "one size fits all";
- Ausgrid's approach takes no account of tree species and growth rates, formative pruning that may have been carried out by local authorities, tree location, maintenance regime or risk of failure;
- Ausgrid contractors effectively use 'lopping', the removal of branches to a designated clearance and not to a branch collar or other growth point. This is described as an 'unacceptable practice' in the Australian Standard for the Pruning of Amenity Trees; and
- lopping is more expensive than a more environmentally sensitive approach would be. The harder a tree is cut the faster the regrowth. So the practice implemented by Ausgrid increases the cost of pruning as the trees require more frequent visits. The approach not only fails in terms of the environment and urban amenity, but economically.

Ausgrid's mutilation of trees is controversial throughout the areas in which it occurs. On 12 October 2016, the Member for Summer Hill, Jo Haylen MP, moved a motion in the NSW Parliament calling on the Baird Government to hold an urgent parliamentary inquiry into "the butchering of trees across the inner west" by Ausgrid contractors. The motion followed a public meeting in Haberfield the previous month that was attended by over 100 people in response to Ausgrid pruning in that suburb.

When questioned about their approach, Ausgrid makes spurious claims to justify the extensive pruning, such as the risk of children climbing trees and getting electrocuted. I have seen no evidence to support this claim. On 13 October 2016, the Member for Sydney, Alex Greenwich MP, asked a number of questions in State parliament about Ausgrid's pruning practices and the claims they have made to justify them. I look forward to the responses.

Lopping in the City's LGA stopped in mid-2016 after representations from the City but continues in the inner west and north shore. We remain concerned that the Ausgrid pruning program for 2017 in the City may include destructive practices, such as lopping in the absence of a formal commitment not to.

Ultimately, the solution is to place power lines underground, something I have been calling for as Lord Mayor and as State MP since 2001. Underground power lines would remove the need to mutilate street trees and provide future generations with a permanent legacy of greater energy reliability, improved safety and a better urban environment. It will bring us into step with other Australian capitals, and major international cities such as London New York, Paris and Rome.

I will write to the Premier requesting that he begin this important work as soon as possible. I will also write to the President of Local Government NSW (LGNSW), Councillor Keith Rhoades, urging LGNSW to run a state-wide campaign on this issue, given it affects communities across our State.

To avoid further mutilation of trees by Ausgrid contractors in the interim, I will seek a formal commitment from Ausgrid that their contractors will use best practice - as defined by the City of Sydney in conjunction with other Councils and major industry associations - when pruning trees, and abide by the Australian Standard for the Pruning of Amenity Trees. This would rule out destructive practices, such as lopping.

I will also urge the Premier to insist that contract conditions attached to the recent leasing of 50.4 per cent of the Ausgrid network includes clear conditions for the successful lessee that tree pruning must be in accordance with best practice and follow the Australian Standard for the Pruning of Amenity Trees.

RECOMMENDATION

It is resolved that Council:

- (A) note the destructive tree pruning practices used by Ausgrid contractors which:
 - (i) are excessive, unnecessary, and not based on a risk management approach, but simply "one size fits all";
 - (ii) take no account of tree species and growth rates, formative pruning that may have been carried out by local authorities, tree location, maintenance regime or risk of failure;
 - (iii) effectively use 'lopping' which is described as an 'unacceptable practice' in the Australian Standard for the Pruning of Amenity Trees, increasing the cost of pruning as the trees require more frequent visits and thus failing not only in terms of the environment and urban amenity, but economically; and

- (iv) is not based on evidence, but on spurious claims, such as the risk of children climbing trees and being electrocuted;
- (B) note that the best way to avoid tree mutilation while providing greater energy reliability, improved safety and a better urban environment is to place power lines underground;
- (C) request the Lord Mayor write to the Premier seeking a commitment that:
 - (i) power lines in NSW will be placed underground as a matter of urgency; and
 - (ii) the contract for the leasing of 50.4 per cent of the Ausgrid network include conditions that pruning of trees across the network be in accordance with best practice and compliant with the Australian Standard for the Pruning of Amenity Trees;
- (D) request the Lord Mayor write to Ausgrid seeking a written assurance that any pruning of trees be in accordance with best practise, compliant with the Australian Standard for the Pruning of Amenity Trees (which requires pruning be undertaken by third parties with Arboriculture qualifications - not 'tree loppers'); and
- (E) request the Lord Mayor write to the President of Local Government NSW, Councillor Keith Rhoades, asking Local Government NSW to run a state-wide campaign about compliance of electricity networks with the Australian Standard for the Pruning of Amenity Trees.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor