



Press Release

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CITY COUNCIL AUTHORIZES CITY ATTORNEY TO FILE CIVIL COMPLAINTS AGAINST OWNERS OF SIX HOMES SEEKING COMPENSATION FOR DESTRUCTION OF OVER 30 CITY-OWNED OAK TREES

Chino Hills, CA – Between May and August of 2020, approximately 60 coastal oaks and 50 toyon shrubs owned by the City of Chino Hills were illegally destroyed by residents along Rancho Hills Drive and Vista Dorada Place. The destruction ranged from topping to cutting down trees and shrubs. The total financial damage for this destruction is valued at an estimated \$845,100.

The first of these incidents occurred on May 3, 2020. This was a devastating incident that resulted in the loss of over 30 Coastal Live Oak trees, with destruction of plant material valued at about \$418,200. Arguably, this first incident was also the catalyst for the later incidents along Rancho Hills Drive and Vista Dorada Place that resulted in a profound loss to the natural beauty on this ridge and destruction of approximately 30 additional oak trees. These trees were cut down along a hiking path enjoyed by many residents who reported the destruction. Chino Hills Police deputies were unable to conclusively identify the perpetrators at that time, and no criminal charges were filed. However, on May 10, 2022, the Chino Hills City Council authorized the City Attorney's office to file civil lawsuits against the owners of six properties believed to be involved in the May 3, 2020, incident: 1531, 1533, 1535, 1537, 1539, and 1541 Rancho Hills Drive. It is expected these lawsuits will be filed by June 15, 2022. These homeowners appeared to benefit from the destruction of the trees by significantly improving the canyon views from their homes.

Chino Hills Police were able to identify the homeowners from three properties responsible for another tree destruction incident that occurred on May 9, 2020. Four defendants were criminally prosecuted and ordered by the court to pay \$23,000 per household in restitution to the City for the illegal cutting down eleven fully mature California Live Oak trees, topping of two more oak trees, and destruction of six toyon shrubs. One household had two defendants, and that couple was jointly liable for their \$23,000 household share. The \$69,000 ordered to be paid to the City merely covers the cost to replace the trees with much younger and smaller trees, and is less than a third of the value of the more than 20-year-old trees and shrubs destroyed behind their properties.

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In spite of these criminal prosecutions and the media coverage, in February 2021 another homeowner cut down two pepper trees and one silver dollar gum tree on City-owned open space property behind their home on Trail View Lane, resulting in at least \$40,000 in damages. And again, in January of 2022, one Chinese Pistache and one Acacia Baileyana shrub on City-owned open space property were destroyed at an estimated value of over \$5,000.

It is against the law to cut or trim trees that are on City property without a City permit. The California Live Oak tree is a native species protected by the Chino Hills Municipal Code. Depending upon the value of the trees, the crime could rise to the level of a felony.

"Trees are one of the most important features of our City's natural environment and provide our community with many benefits," said City Manager Ben Montgomery. "Trees beautify neighborhoods and trails for our residents, provide shade, support a habitat for wildlife in our community, help reduce erosion, and add property value. The City of Chino Hills will continue to seek prosecution and restitution of any illegal cutting of City trees to the greatest extent of the law."

The City is seeking full compensation from all parties responsible for these various acts of destruction to help recoup its losses, pay for planting replacement trees and shrubs, and to discourage others from vandalism and destruction of the City's trees and shrubs. California law allows recovery of up to triple the financial damages in these types of cases, providing a powerful disincentive to destroying City trees.

To date, the City Attorney's office has initiated civil demands to 13 of the approximately 18 addresses initially believed to be involved and intends to file civil lawsuits for the willful destruction of City property.

"While the City is pleased with the award of \$69,000 restitution for the trees and shrubs destroyed on May 9, 2020, the City is still seeking information regarding those responsible for the other tree-destruction incidents that took place around this time," Montgomery said.

If residents have any information regarding those responsible for the other tree-cutting incidents along the public trail at Rancho Hills Drive and Vista Dorada Place in 2020, or see any other illegal cutting of City trees, please contact the Public Works Department by calling (909) 364-2800. For more information on City trees and the valuable role they play in the community, visit www.chinohills.org/Trees.

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