



Press Release

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CRIMINAL COURT JUDGE ORDERS \$69,000 IN RESTITUTION PAID TO CITY OF CHINO HILLS FOR DESTRUCTION OF CITY-OWNED OAK TREES

Chino Hills, CA – At a September 10, 2021, criminal restitution hearing, Rancho Cucamonga Superior Court Judge Michael A. Camber ordered \$69,000 in restitution to be paid to the City of Chino Hills for the illegal cutting down of eleven fully mature California Live Oak trees, topping of two more oak trees, and destruction of six toyon shrubs that took place on May 9, 2020, along Rancho Hills Drive.

“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. Trees belong to the community and 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 California Live Oak tree is a native species protected by the Chino Hills Municipal Code. It is against the law to cut or trim trees that are in the City open space without a City permit. Depending upon the value of the trees, the crime could rise to the level of a felony. The May 9, 2020 incident was just one of multiple incidents of tree and shrub destruction along the public trail at Rancho Hills Drive and Vista Dorada Place. The total value of all damaged plants resulting from the multiple acts of vandalism was \$845,100.

“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.

The City was seeking \$234,728 in restitution based on the actual value of the quarter-century-old oak trees for the May 9, 2020 incident. Each of the four defendants accepted a plea deal offered by the Court and agreed to by the District Attorney in which they did not plead guilty but were instead granted a period of diversion for two years, as permitted by

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State law. As part of the diversion conditions, the Judge ordered \$23,000 to be paid per household, for a total of \$69,000 paid to the City. One household has two defendants, and that couple is jointly liable for their \$23,000 household share. Criminal restitution was awarded to provide funds to plant young trees to replace those destroyed, but it does not prevent the City from pursuing any civil remedies in the future to collect the rest of the \$234,728 that the City's expert explained was the full value of the destroyed larger and more mature trees.

The \$69,000 includes \$58,000 to replace the trees and \$11,000 for the City's expert and legal costs. The City will use the restitution payments to plant and maintain the Coastal Live Oak trees so that they can continue to serve their intended purpose. Younger trees will be planted because it is very expensive and not practical to transplant equivalent mature trees. The City required a developer to originally plant the trees late in the last century as part of the overall plan for the housing development constructed above. The City required the trees be planted for multiple reasons including to prevent erosion of the slope, to replace the native trees and habitat that were removed when the houses were built, to beautify and provide shade for the City trail beside them, and as a screen, so that those viewing the hill from below would see vegetation rather than houses and grading.

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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