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Please consider the following from Boyd Johnson, Georgetown County planning director, for your editorial page.

Tree ordinance is complicated, but worth the effort

“Can I remove a tree on my property?”

That’s one of the questions most frequently asked of the Georgetown County Planning Department staff. The answer is, “it depends.”

Like many local governments across the country, Georgetown County has recognized the value of tree protection and adopted a tree protection ordinance. While these ordinances are very common, they can be difficult to enforce and costly problems can arise if the community is not aware of the regulations in place.

The first thing to know about the county’s tree protection ordinance is it doesn’t apply to occupied residential property, so homeowners are exempt.

The ordinance does apply to all commercial property and vacant residential property.

Georgetown County’s tree protection ordinance covers the entire county with the exception of incorporated areas – the City of Georgetown, Town of Andrews and Town of Pawleys Island.

As one would expect, commercial tree harvesting is exempt from the ordinance. Also, pine trees are not protected except for the longleaf pine, and then only on the Waccamaw Neck. This slow-growing pine is native to the area and usually not planted by the timber industry as other pines grow much faster and increase the stock available to local mills.

Trees protected in Georgetown County include oaks (with exception to turkey and blackjack oaks), hickories (except the pecan and pignut variety) and the following others: red maple, yellow poplar, bald cypress, pond cypress, American beech, Southern magnolia, American elm, river birch and longleaf pine.

Remember, the long leaf pine is protected only on the Waccamaw Neck, and there are additional qualifications that type of tree must meet for protection.

Only longleaf pines that are at least 12 inches in diameter near the base (we measure about four feet from the ground) are protected under the county’s tree ordinance.

All other trees must be at least eight inches in diameter to be protected under the ordinance.

Removal Process

The process for removing trees on commercial property is as follows: A commercial developer submits a plan to county staff, usually the zoning department, showing which trees are to be

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removed. Staff works with the developer to save as many trees as possible. However, sometimes a tree has to be removed in order to practically locate a building on a parcel.

In this instance, the county would issue a free tree permit to remove the protected tree and determine how many replacement trees need to be replanted to substitute for the lost tree. The county recognizes that a piece of land can only support a certain number of healthy trees and this is factored into the formula for determining tree replacement. If a commercial site is small, staff will meet the developer onsite and look at the trees in order to save the developer the time and money required for a surveyed tree plan.

Someone wanting to build a house on their vacant residential lot would also begin the tree removal process with the zoning department. Once an application is submitted, staff works with the applicant to determine if any protected trees are in the footprint of the proposed house. As with commercial property, if the only practical configuration for the house on the lot involves removing a protected tree, a free tree permit is issued.

A residential developer seeking to subdivide a parcel into multiple lots must address protected trees on the preliminary subdivision plat. The planning department will work with the owner and surveyor to locate protected trees near property lines, away from a future dwelling site or proposed streets and utilities. Being proactive up front in designing a subdivision can prevent the unnecessary removal of protected trees in the future.

Taking property rights into consideration, county officials made the decision not to apply the tree protection ordinance to lots that already contain a home. Homeowners in Georgetown County are not restricted in any way from removing a tree from their own yards.

Why it's worth the effort

Clearly, the tree protection ordinance is complicated and, thus, a lot goes into enforcing it. That leads us to another frequently asked question at the planning department: "Why have a tree protection ordinance?"

Quite simply, trees provide many benefits and are worth the effort and work required to protect them.

Benefits can be both environmental and economic. Everyone knows that trees produce oxygen, provide shade, filter stormwater, stabilize the soil, provide wildlife habitat and a myriad of other environmental benefits.

It can be as much as 10 degrees cooler in a commercial parking lot if trees are present to provide shade. Parts of urban areas are now referred to as "heat islands" due to the lack of shade and abundance of hard surfaces.

Even for those who don't consider themselves to be environmentalists, the economic benefits of tree protection are undeniable. Many don't seem to realize trees have monetary value beyond the lumberyard. Studies show that depending on location, number and type of trees, and myriad other factors, trees can add between 3 and 15 percent to a property's value. It makes sense when you think about it. If you're buying a home, which is more appealing: a house with a large live oak in the front yard or a barren landscape?

The best thing to do if you are getting ready to remove a tree is call the zoning department, 545-3128 or the planning department, 545-3158, and let our staff guide you through the process. We understand the ordinance can create frustration for some, but in the long run, it's worth it for the community and we're happy to help make navigating the ins and outs of the law as painless as possible.